INFLUENCES ON TEACHERS' DECISION-MAKING WHEN WORKING WITH STUDENTS WHO HAVE DIFFICULTY LEARNING TO READ

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Research shows that having an excellent reading teacher in the classroom is key to preventing reading difficulties. However, teachers often feel unprepared to work with students experiencing reading difficulties. This can be problematic in a school that uses a multi-tiered system of support for students in which the classroom teacher is responsible for core instruction and early reading interventions. This qualitative study examined the influences on elementary teachers' instructional and assessment decisions when teaching reading to students who are experiencing reading difficulties. Data were collected through both survey and interviews and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Five themes were identified that suggest teachers' literacy instructional decisions are influenced by administrators, their knowledge of reading instruction, professional development, their beliefs about using data for instruction, and collaboration. Findings from this study provide evidence that teacher decisions are more heavily influenced by forces when teachers lack a deep understanding of their students or of effective literacy instruction. When this happens, teachers' efficacy is also affected, which research shows can affect student outcomes. Teacher decision-making is supported through professional development on effective literacy instruction and use of data for planning. Teacher efficacy improves with opportunities to work with and learn from colleagues and from having administrators who work alongside them when making literacy decisions. Recommendations for administrators, teacher educators, and teachers are included as well as suggestions for future research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Some research has suggested that teacher quality makes a greater impact on student achievement than any other factor (Holdaway, 1984; Mendro, 1998; Sanders et al., 1997). Additionally, Horn and Tynan (2001) suggested that reading difficulties are often the result of *ineffective reading instruction* rather than neurological dysfunction. If effective reading teachers are instrumental in teaching children to read, and *in*effective reading teachers are at least partially responsible for students' difficulties in learning to read, then it is important to understand teachers' decisions about reading instruction and the factors that influence those decisions.

This is especially true for teachers with students who are having difficulty learning to read. Teachers do not always have the autonomy to make decisions for these readers, who are often labeled "below proficient" by reading screeners. Many school districts have frameworks that explain what teachers should do when children are identified as "below proficient" on academic screeners. These frameworks are often based on Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks, which require classroom teachers to begin providing additional, intentional, small-group instruction for these children. The concern is whether all teachers are able to meet the needs of students who are having difficulty learning to read. This study focused on the influences on teachers' decision-making when teaching reading and working with students who are experiencing reading difficulties.

Personal Context

This study originated with my personal experiences and passions, which were the

catalysts for conceptualizing and conducting this research. For the last 20 years, I have been on a mission to learn how to teach reading. When I graduated with my bachelor's degree over 2 decades ago, I felt unprepared to be a reading teacher. I shied away from teaching children younger than third grade because I feared teaching reading to children who had no history of reading instruction, and also because I had not spent much time with younger children in the classroom. In my first years of teaching, following the lesson suggestions in reading basals provided to teachers heavily influenced how I taught reading, but when students had difficulty reading grade-level text, I was unsure how to help them.

After 3 years of teaching, I started to teach early literacy skills in a preschool classroom. My confidence in teaching literacy grew as I watched my preschoolers learn basic alphabetic principles and start to put words together in writing and reading. After teaching preschool, I became a long-term substitute teacher in a Title I reading interventionist's position, which led to a full-time reading interventionist position. Through this experience – the programs I used, the children I worked with, and the professional development I attended – I learned strategies for working with all readers in my general education classroom, including those who were not making the same progress as their peers.

As a general education elementary teacher, I had to individualize instruction to meet the needs of students who were reading above grade-level standards as well as below. I have taught many third, fourth, and fifth-grade students who were 2–3 years behind their peers in reading ability; every time I met one of these students, I had to make decisions about how I could help him or her become a fluent reader. I relied on my knowledge of reading acquisition and remediation to make these decisions, but I also knew that my school had expectations for

me as a teacher and for my students. Parts of these expectations were communicated through the school's RTI policies, which varied from school to school.

My first experience with RTI was when I served as a Title I reading interventionist. In this placement, the entire school had literacy at the same time of day. This allowed every certified teacher in the building to work with students on literacy, including the art, music, and physical education teachers and the librarian. Students were divided among the teachers according to their reading levels. This meant that some third-graders were using the fifth-grade reading program with fifth-graders, and some fifth-graders were in small-group literacy classes using remedial reading programs with me, a special education teacher, or one of the other nonclassroom teachers. Every teacher in the building and most teacher aides received training on how to use the reading program with fidelity.

The RTI team met with teachers who had student academic or behavioral concerns. The RTI team would decide together what intervention should be tried by the teacher, and the teacher would keep notes on the intervention results and monitor the progress of students. Then, the teacher would meet again with the RTI team and decide together whether the intervention should continue or be altered. If the teacher needed help with a particular intervention, or if the team thought the child would benefit from a more intensive intervention with a different teacher, I would often step in to help. This system was highly supportive for teachers.

When I moved to a new school in a new state, RTI was handled differently. At that school, teachers were required to fill out a stack of detailed forms that were then submitted to the RTI leader. She would then put these forms back in the teachers' mailboxes with sticky

notes asking them to make corrections on minute details, such as how the papers were ordered or numbered. This process discouraged teachers from submitting student information for RTI, because it was tedious and time-consuming and resulted in no support for the teacher. Eventually, because teachers were reluctant to start the RTI process for students, the principal mandated that teachers submit students' names to RTI if they scored below specific scores on district benchmark assessments or other mandated tests. These expectations, most notably the scores generated through state reading benchmarks and other mandated testing, influenced my decisions on how to help my students. Teachers make decisions daily on how to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms, and many forces influence these decisions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the influences on teachers' decisions while they are planning, implementing, and assessing students, especially those experiencing difficulties learning to read. Decision-making is complex and many forces influence it (Schwille, Porter, & Gant, 1980). Teachers make decisions when planning for learning using their knowledge of the content and the curriculum, as well as their knowledge of the children in their classrooms (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). These plans are adapted during implementation as the teacher responds to the needs of the children through in-the-moment decisions during their lessons (Pitkäniemi, 2010).

This study considered several influences on decision-making, including school and school district policies and procedures. Teachers are a part of a larger system, and pressures are exerted on them from all directions. The sources of these pressures include policy decisions

made outside of schools, decisions made inside schools and school districts, and even the teachers themselves (Schwille et al., 1980).

This research adds to the existing knowledge on how literacy teachers' practices and decision-making are influenced by many forces. It is crucial to understand how literacy teachers can help every child become a reader despite the numerous influences on teachers' instructional decisions.

Research Question

What influences kindergarten through sixth-grade literacy teachers' instructional decisions when planning, implementing, and assessing students, especially students who are experiencing reading difficulties?

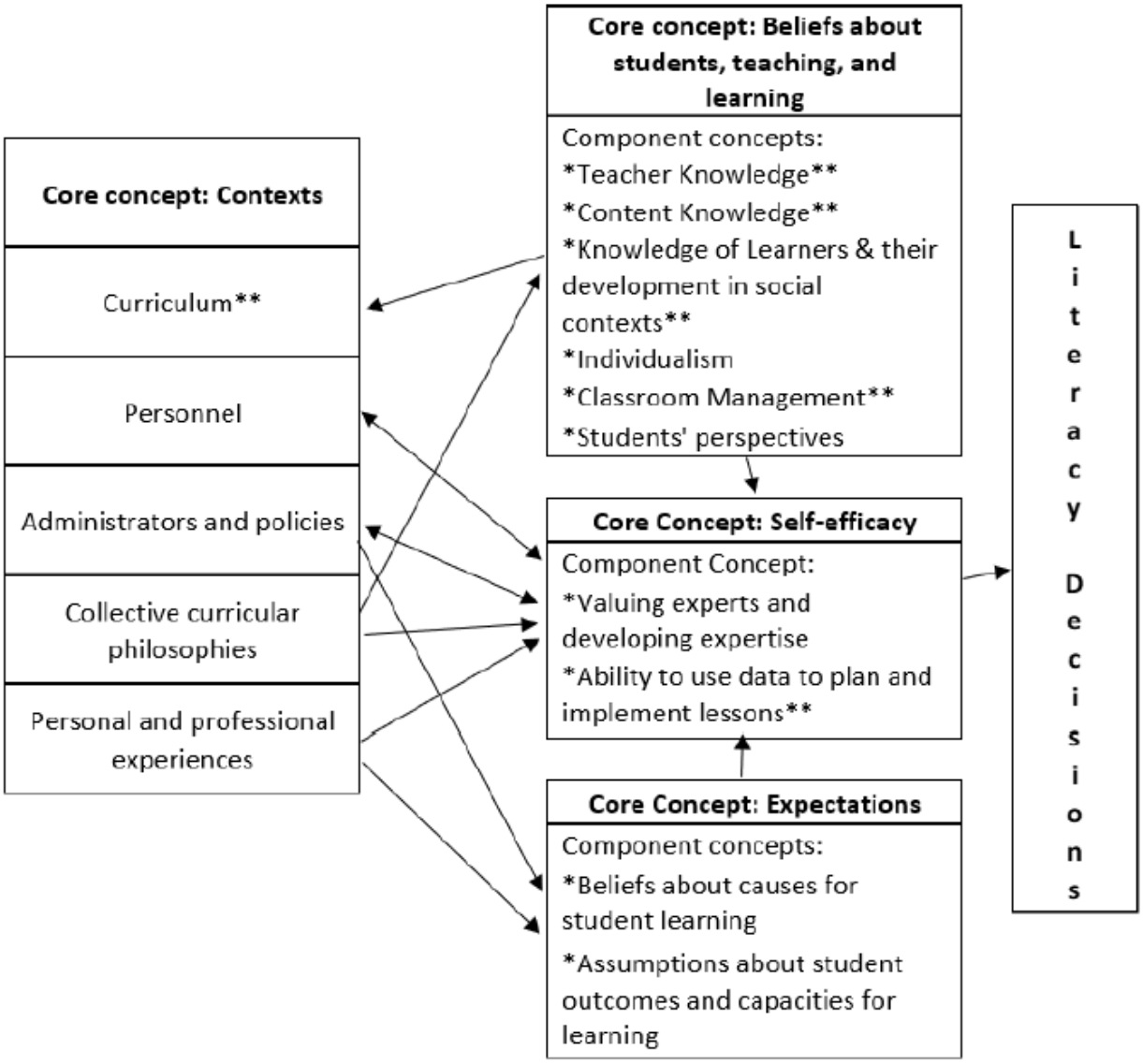
Conceptual Framework

To guide my study, I used Ruppar et al.'s (2015) preliminary theoretical framework for teacher decision-making in literacy with elements added from other decision-making frameworks (Bransford, et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018; see Figure 1.1). The reason for using this visualization of the interaction of contexts and concepts that influence decision-making is that it includes several concepts that other frameworks do not: specifically, teachers' self-efficacy and expectations of and for students. It also includes the external influences that researchers have reported as influencing teacher decisions (e.g. Bransford et al., 2005; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Griffith, et al., 2013; Jones, et al., 2012; Shavelson & Stern, 1981), namely curriculum, administration, policies, experience, and professional development. I

used this conceptual framework when looking for recurring concepts and ideas in the data that I collected and analyzed.

Figure 1.1

Visualization of the Conceptual Framework of this Study



Note. This study's conceptual framework was based on Ruppar et al.'s (2015) preliminary theoretical framework of how special education teachers make decisions in literacy with additions from other researchers' frameworks for teacher decision-making (Bransford, et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018). The arrows show the directionality of influences on decisions; ** indicates additions or changes made to Ruppar et al.'s (2015) original framework (Figure 2.3).

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they are used in this dissertation for the reader to further understand their purpose:

- *Below-proficient reader* – A label assigned to a child by a school or school district's universal screener or standardized assessment. Each school or school district assigns cut-off scores to label students as proficient or below-proficient. On state-mandated assessments, these labels are based on state-provided cut-off scores.
- *Children who are experiencing reading difficulties*– These are children who are unable to read texts at their grade-level standards as set by the school or school district. These students might have difficulty reading for many reasons and are not just students with an identified reading disability.
- *External influences* – Influences on a teacher's decision-making that come from outside such as policy, school-mandated procedures, curriculum, standards, and student needs.
- *Internal influences* – Influences on a teacher's decision-making that come from within the teacher such as personal beliefs and theoretical orientation.
- *Proficient reader* – A label assigned to a child by a school or school district's universal screener or standardized assessment. Each school or school district assigns cut-off scores to label students as proficient. In 2018, Texas third-graders needed to answer 64% of the state-mandated end-of-year reading assessment questions correctly to be considered proficient. Fourth-graders needed to answer 60% correctly and fifth-graders 54%.
- *Progress-monitoring* – A form of quick reading assessment that is given to track a student's progress on the skill(s) being worked on during reading lessons.

- *Response to intervention (RTI)* – A (typically) three-tiered process used by schools to ensure that every child receives high-quality instruction to prevent learning and/or behavioral difficulties and to improve the process for diagnosing learning disabilities (Gersten et al., 2008). Each tier determines the level and intensity of the instruction or intervention provided to students as well as the use of personnel with specialized expertise who work with the students (Fuchs et al., 2012). RTI is based on recommendations made in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for the diagnosis of specific learning disabilities. Researchers and practitioners may define RTI differently (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), so for the purpose of this paper, each tier is defined below. Additionally, RTI can be used in other academic subjects and behavior interventions. However, I focused only on RTI in reading.

- *Tier I in RTI* - All children receive the core reading instruction in the classroom. Classroom teachers use assessment data and progress-monitoring to provide differentiated reading instruction that is designed to meet the needs of every student (Gersten et al., 2008).

- *Tier II in RTI* – Explicit instruction in small homogenous groups that occurs in addition to Tier I core instruction. The instruction is systematic and typically skills-based according to student scores on universal screeners. Tier II interventions should be held three to five times per week for 20–40 minutes, and progress should be monitored at minimum once per month (Gersten et al., 2008).

- *Tier III in RTI* – Instruction is even more focused than in Tier II and conducted in small groups or one-on-one. Typically, Tier III is conducted by personnel who have specialized qualifications, such as special education teachers or reading specialists (Gersten et al., 2008). Students are progress-monitored more often than once per month. In many school districts,

students qualify for Tier III interventions when they are identified as having a specific learning disability in reading, and Tier III is often considered an exit from RTI into special education (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

Summary

In summary, my purpose for conducting this research was to understand more about the influences on teachers' decision-making when they are working with students who are learning to read. All teachers must make minute-by-minute decisions on how to help all readers, and it is important for teacher educators and administrators to know how forces impact teachers' decision-making.

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 begins with a brief overview of research on what it means to be a reader and some views on effective reading instruction. Next, I present research on schools' use of a tiered instructional framework, namely RTI, to maximize reading growth for all readers. This discussion leads to one organization's description of excellent literacy teachers. The purpose of these first sections is to answer the following question: What do children need to develop as readers? Without this background knowledge, it is difficult to understand the importance of teachers' decisions when planning, implementing those plans, or assessing children, especially for students having difficulty learning to read. The literature review ends with a discussion on teacher decision-making frameworks and the influences on the instructional decisions that teachers make when teaching reading.

In Chapter 3, I explain my methodology, including my research design, data collection and analysis, and how my study changed due to COVID-19. In Chapter 4, I share my findings which include five themes and vignettes of each participant that illustrate how each teacher is

influenced by my five themes. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss my findings, make recommendations for administrators, teacher educators, and teachers, and I make suggestions for future research.

Researcher Positionality

Before I begin the literature review, I want to share my experiences and beliefs. I am an early literacy instructor at a well-known university in Texas. I teach reading and writing classes to preservice teachers. Before I started to teach at the university level, I was an elementary school teacher and reading interventionist. During my years as a teacher, I developed my own set of beliefs about how children learn to read and what types of interventions make the most impact on children who arrive in Grade 3 or higher reading at levels a year or more behind their peers. The schools in which I taught typically used scripted skills-based (i.e., heavily focused on phonological awareness and phonics) reading programs for children who were having difficulty with reading. I received training on implementing these skills-based programs "with fidelity," and my students made great progress in my reading groups. Many of the third-graders I taught ended the year on-level for reading, whereas older children made tremendous progress but did not reach grade-level.

I am also a content writer for the Texas House Bill 3 reading academies discussed in this paper. In this role, I write content for the modules that teachers all over Texas complete to meet state requirements. These reading academies are focused on the "science of teaching reading," a framework that describes the components of literacy that reading experts – using scientific, evidence-based research – have determined that students require in order to best learn to read. The primary body of research for these academies comes from the National

Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) report, the Report of the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006), and the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008).

In these reading academies, we teach learners about explicit, systematic instruction in all components of literacy; about using flexible grouping to meet the needs of students; and about differentiating instruction. We teach learners how to use formal and informal assessments to determine their students' strengths and needs so that their instruction can be data-driven. We also cover the importance of using tiered support systems such as RTI to meet the needs of every reader. Because of this work on the reading academies, my own experiences as a reading teacher and interventionist, and my own research on best practices for students who are having difficulty learning to read, my philosophy for teaching reading is biased toward teaching reading through explicit, systematic reading instruction that provides a foundation of phonological awareness and phonics.

Through other research on helping children with reading difficulties and my personal experiences, I am also aware that teaching students to decode controlled texts, as is common in most reading intervention programs, is not enough to develop readers. Moreover, I am aware that teaching reading and writing goes far beyond the five components presented by the NRP (NRP, 2000). For example, students who have difficulty reading also require reading experiences that teach them the joy of reading or they will not choose to read outside of the classroom. Many of the readers in my intervention groups by third grade had never read a chapter book on their own. Not only did I provide the explicit, systematic instruction for my students but also used literature circles to support them in reading longer authentic texts. I

remember when one student's mother came to me with tears in her eyes and told me that her 8-year-old daughter had finished a novel for the first time and had been so moved by the ending that she had cried. The mother told me that her daughter had never connected emotionally to a book because the only books she read at home were the leveled texts assigned for repeated reading at home. Leveled readers often do not inspire emotional connection to the characters, especially those provided for the lowest readers.

Transparency is crucial in this study. Reading instruction has been debated for decades, and many excellent reports on reading research have been published that demonstrate reading instruction to be a complex subject that extends far beyond teaching children to read words on a page. I acknowledge that this paper does not represent the breadth of this research, but it does more closely align with the Science of Teaching Reading research that teachers in Texas and other states are being asked to learn about and follow.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classrooms typically have readers at all stages of proficiency, and teachers must decide how they will meet the needs of each of these students. These decisions are influenced by factors such as teachers' and school districts' definitions of what it means to be a "proficient" reader, their beliefs about the best methods for teaching reading, and the schools' procedures for meeting the needs of children who are having reading difficulties. In many school districts, students who are not meeting the state or school district benchmarks for "proficient" reading or who are at-risk of not meeting those proficiency standards (i.e., they are not making the necessary progress to meet them) are labeled "below-proficient" readers. They might be students with learning disabilities or students who are learning English as a second language, but they might also just be students who require additional, targeted instruction to meet the "proficient" benchmarks. In this paper, I refer to these children as "below-proficient" readers as well as students having or experiencing reading difficulties.

This literature review chapter begins by examining several teacher decision-making frameworks. Then, it presents influences on teachers' decisions organized by three main concepts found in these frameworks: contexts; knowledge and beliefs about students, teaching, and learning; and self-efficacy.

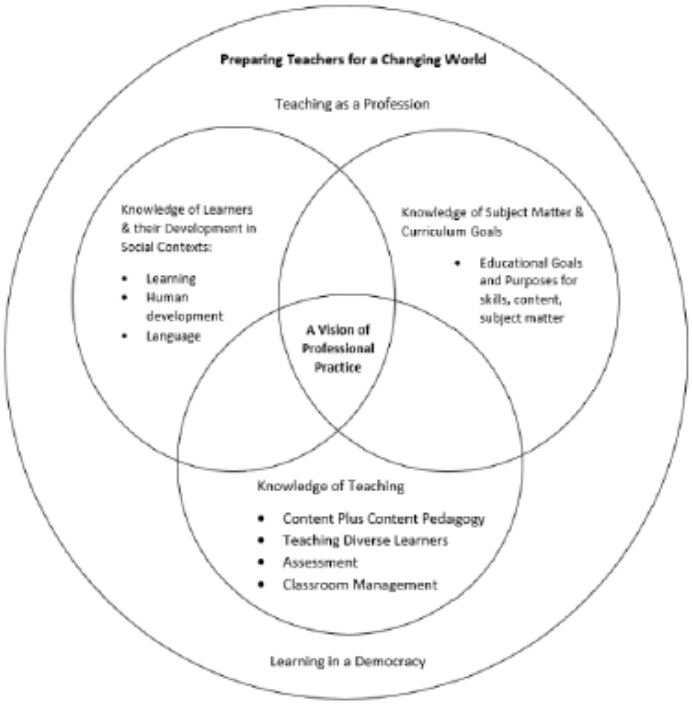
Frameworks for Teacher Decision-Making

This section presents multiple frameworks that demonstrate teacher decision-making processes or influences. These frameworks represent a selection of research on teacher decision-making across content areas as well as specifically in literacy.

Bransford et al. (2005) designed the Framework for Preparing Teachers for a Changing World (see Figure 2.1) to conceptualize the decisions that teachers make while planning instruction, implementing instruction, and assessing student learning. This framework organizes teacher decision-making into three categories: knowledge of learners and their development in social contexts, knowledge of subject matter and curriculum goals, and knowledge of teaching. These three categories are interrelated and influenced by knowledge of teaching as a profession and learning in a democracy.

Figure 2.1

Bransford et al.'s (2005) Preparing Teachers for a Changing World



Note. Bransford et al.'s (2005) framework for teacher knowledge and decision-making includes three sources of knowledge of the profession and community at large.

Pitkäniemi (2010) explained teacher decision-making even further using a four-part conceptual system that includes what he called practical theory, script, agenda, and interactive

thoughts. Unlike Bransford et al.'s framework, which is focused on teacher knowledge, Pitkäniemi's conceptual system illustrates the relationship between teachers' cognition and practice. His framework is dynamic – highlighting that teachers' decisions are constantly affected not only by their pedagogy and beliefs but also by how students respond to instruction.

In Pitkäniemi's framework (2010), *practical theory* refers to teachers' "values, attitudes, beliefs, and emotional and moral elements" based on experience and their theoretical knowledge as it relates to teaching situations (p. 159). These theories are used as the basis for making decisions when preparing for instruction. The *script* is the lesson plan prepared prior to teaching the lesson. Experienced teachers make decisions in the script based on both pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge about the children in their classroom, which comes from experience. However, this experience is often not enough to ensure that teachers are effective instructors, and Pitkäniemi recommended that teachers receive professional development or have opportunities to interact with other educators or educational publications. *The agenda* refers to "the teacher's mental and operational 'on-the-spot plan' for a particular lesson" that adjusts as students respond to instruction (Pitkäniemi, 2010, p. 159). Starting with a script allows a teacher to plan for learning, but the agenda takes that plan and makes it into a living document. Finally, *interactive thoughts* are the teacher's cognition behind an action: "They are characterized as split-second thoughts, integrative in nature, tied to the specific context (i.e., the lesson), and closely connected to the teacher's knowledge and beliefs on one hand, and closely to classroom practice on the other" (Pitkäniemi, 2010, p. 161). The *agenda* and *interactive thoughts* allow teachers to respond to students throughout the lesson,

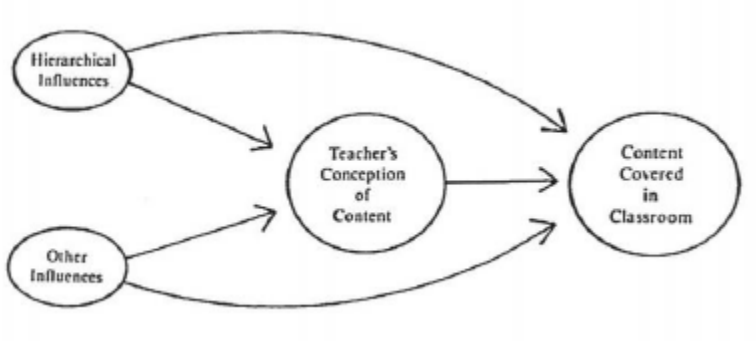
adapting the script and using their practical theory to adjust for students' needs.

Schwille et al. (1980) identified the following three sources of influence on content decisions (see Figure 2.2):

1. A formal hierarchical component that transmits the policy decisions of higher authorities and which therefore reflects political processes bearing on a school system as a whole
2. Other influences from inside or outside the agency that are brought directly to bear on the teacher
3. The teacher's own conceptions of what outputs are desirable and feasible (p. 34)

Figure 2.2

Sources of Influence on Teacher Decision-Making



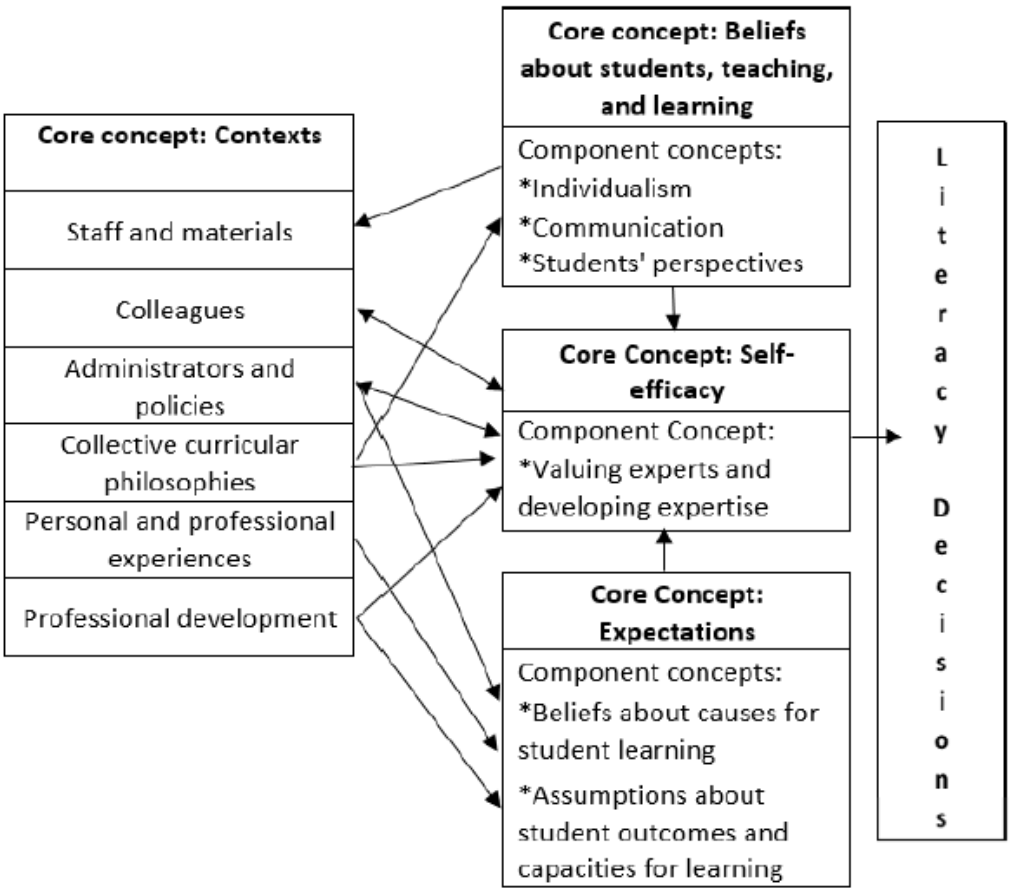
Note. Schwille et al.'s (1980) three sources of influence on teacher decision-making include hierarchical influences, other influences that directly affect the teacher, and the teacher's conception of what is important.

The following two decision-making frameworks are specific to literacy decisions. Ruppar et al. (2015) had a more complex theoretical framework of teacher decision-making that explored how contexts and teachers' core concepts interact to inform teacher decisions in literacy (see Figure 2.3). This decision-making framework, like the aforementioned frameworks, includes teachers' beliefs about students, teaching, and learning. However, these researchers noticed that literacy teachers are heavily influenced by contexts that are not evident in other

decision-making frameworks, such as interaction with colleagues and what they called "collective curricular philosophies." The term collective curricular philosophies refers to teachers who adopt instructional strategies and classroom procedures that their schools and fellow teachers adopt because they feel supported in those decisions. Other concepts Ruppar et al. (2015) included that are unique to their decision-making framework as core concepts that influence teacher decisions in literacy are teachers' self-efficacy and teachers' expectations of and for students.

Figure 2.3

Ruppar, Gaffney, and Dymond's (2015) Teacher Decision-Making Framework in Literacy

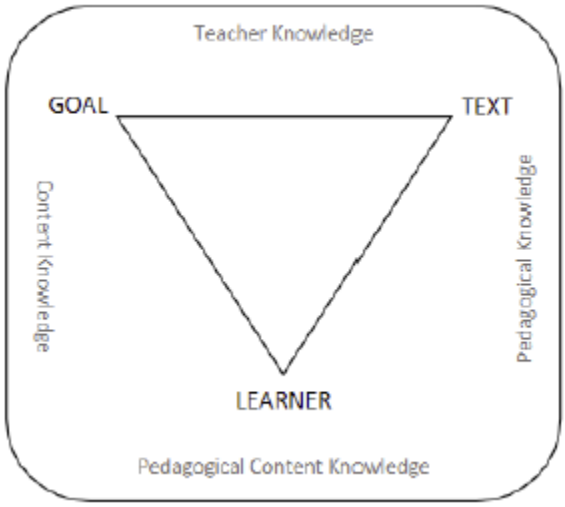


Note. Ruppar et al.'s (2015) theoretical framework of teacher decision-making indicates that literacy decisions are influenced by contexts and concepts that teachers have about students and teaching as well as teachers' self-efficacy and expectations for students.

The final decision-making framework to be introduced in this section is by Griffith and Lacina (2018). This framework is unique from the others because it includes texts (see Figure 2.4). In reading instruction, choosing the right text for the student and for the reading skill(s) necessary for that student or group of students is vital. The reading levels of the texts should not be too easy nor too difficult. The texts should be interesting to the students to promote engagement, and they should provide opportunities for using strategies such as word solving, fluency and expression, vocabulary development, comprehension development, and learning about the world (Griffith & Lacina, 2018). Teachers also make decisions on how to use the text during lessons, including what type of support to provide students to help them access the text.

Figure 2.4

Griffith and Lacina's (2018) Teacher Decision-Making Framework in Literacy



Note. Griffith and Lacina's (2018) framework is for teacher decision-making in teaching guided reading. Teachers make decisions about goals, learners, and texts based on their beliefs, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge.

Influences on Teachers' Decision-Making

The aforementioned complex decision-making frameworks have many similarities. They

indicate that teachers' decisions are influenced by factors such as the contexts in which the teachers work (Bransford et al., 2015; Schwille et al., 1980; Ruppar et al., 2015), teachers' knowledge of learners and their development (Bransford et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018; Pitkäniemi, 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015), teachers' knowledge of the subject matter and curriculum goals (Bransford et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018; Pitkäniemi, 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015; Schwille et al., 1980), and teachers' pedagogical knowledge (Bransford et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018; Pitkäniemi, 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015). One influence, self-efficacy, is only mentioned in Ruppar et al.'s (2015) framework. However, because I adapted Ruppar et al.'s (2015) framework to use as my conceptual framework, self-efficacy is included in this literature review.

I have structured this review of the influences on teachers' decisions according to three discussions: contexts that influence decision-making; knowledge and beliefs about students, teaching, and learning that influence decision-making; and the influence of self-efficacy on decision-making.

Contexts that Influence Decision-Making

Contexts in this study refer to the teachers' school communities in which they work; their school and district administrators; and the school, district, and state policies. Priestley et al. (2016) posited the following: "Although teachers may come to a situation equipped with substantial capacity (for example, skills and knowledge) and strong educational aspirations, they may encounter a context in which innovation may simply prove to be too difficult or too risky to enact" (p. 11 of e-book chapter under "Conclusion"). In this section, I have included

three contexts that influence decision-making: curriculum, personnel, and administration and policy.

Curriculum

Valli et al. (2012) found that the greatest policy impact on teachers was the adoption of new reading and math curricula, as well as the pressure of achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) according to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) regulations. When schools adopt literacy materials, teachers are not always obligated to use them. When they are obligated to use the materials, teachers may feel tension between their beliefs about student learning and their obligation to follow a mandated program if there is a disconnect between the two (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Griffith & Groulx, 2014; Ruppar, et al., 2015, Vallii et al., 2012). Datnow and Costellano (2000) found that teachers are more likely to use a program willingly if it fits with their personal beliefs about good literacy teaching, and that teacher experience was not a factor in program acceptance. Their study also demonstrated that teachers would be more accepting of an intervention program if they had created it themselves (Datnow & Costellano, 2000). Another study by Bradfield and Exley (2020) found that teachers' adherence to a particular curriculum was based on opportunities for professional development, the teachers' leadership capacity in designing or preparing the curriculum, possession of alternative programs that take the place of the curriculum, and whether the school prioritizes the subject area featured in the curriculum.

According to Heydon et al. (2004), a teacher's need to predict and control outcomes is a key influence on his or her decisions. A reliance on teacher-centered skills instruction may feel safe because it is easier to control than approaches that are student-centered (Alexander &

Fox, 2006). This means that teachers may feel more effective if they follow skills-based programs, which are often prescriptive in nature and backed by "scientific research."

The scientific approach to reading relies on behaviorist theories of reading that identify reading as a set of skills that can be measured. Shannon (2007) related this to Georg Lukacs' theory of reification. Reification refer to treating something abstract, such as reading, as if it were a concrete object or a procedure that is unchangeable. With reification, reading is seen as a scientific activity, which means that teaching reading should be taught in a set manner. As a result, teachers are convinced through multiple means that reading must be taught according to the lesson plan in a reading program written by an "expert" to be taught correctly (Shannon, 2007).

Textbook publishers gain power in reading instruction through such trust. Apple (1992) stated that this trust in textbooks leads to deskilled teachers, because teachers rely on the textbook to guide their reading instruction. Teachers who are required to implement scripted programs because of a school or school district mandate must occasionally ignore their own beliefs about literacy development or literacy instruction in order to teach the program with fidelity (Griffith, 2008). However, current research revealed that teachers do not always trust the "experts" who design the curriculum or write the textbooks, and they adjust the curriculum to align it with their personal beliefs (Griffith & Groulx, 2014).

By contrast, Siuty et al. (2018) suggested that the curriculum helps teachers differentiate their instruction and increases teacher self-efficacy in literacy instruction. This could be critical if one considers that Cantrell et al. (2013) found that teacher efficacy in literacy

teaching might be “more important to improving students’ reading comprehension than teachers’ fidelity of program implementation in terms of program adherence” (p. 46).

Personnel

In a review of research on teacher collaboration, Vangrieken et al. (2015) found that teacher collaboration can lead to positive consequences such as more student-centered instruction and a “school-wide attention for needs of students” (p. 27), but that it might also lead to negative consequences such as “pressure to conform to the majority and a loss of autonomy” (p. 29). Reeves et al. (2017) found that collaboration during lesson planning predicted an improvement in student learning outcomes, but other types of collaboration did not.

Other research has demonstrated that teacher collaboration leads to positive student outcomes (Goddard & Kim, 2018; Ronfeldt et al., 2015). In a case study of four teachers, Takahashi (2011) found that the practice of examining student data in a collaborative setting strengthened teachers’ beliefs that teachers are “responsible for and capable of bringing about improved student learning” (p. 739) – which is an indicator of self-efficacy. Another study found that schools with greater “collective efficacy,” or efficacy constructed through collaborative experiences, had greater levels of student achievement (Goddard et al., 2015).

Administration and Policy

I this section, I discuss two policies that influence teachers’ decisions in schools: assessment policies and RTI. Subsequently, I continue by discussing the influence of administrators on teachers’ decision-making.

Assessment Policy

One challenge in teacher decision-making that Heydon et al. (2004) proposed is the accountability movement. Students are held accountable for their learning through standardized tests, and teachers are held accountable through student scores on those tests. This pressure on teachers encourages their use of skills-based teaching, which aligns more closely with test-centric literacy skills. Examples of test-centric literacy instructional decisions are prioritizing tested standards, using test-formatted passages, teaching strategies for annotating passages, conducting item teaching, and performing item-level data analysis (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018). According to Davis and Vehabovic (2018), when teachers focus instruction on tested standards, many nontested standards become deprivileged. Standards that are tested are often subjected to testing because they are easier to assess using multiple-choice questions. Other standards are not measurable with multiple choice, so those standards will not be tested, and therefore, teachers may decide to not teach them. Shepard (2009) warned that if assessment data are going to be used for learning, then teachers must "recognize the pervasive negative effects of accountability tests and the extent to which externally imposed testing programs prevent and drive out thoughtful classroom practices" (p. 9). One area in which this can already be seen is in teachers' decisions on how to assess students' learning through formative assessments. Box et al. (2015) found that the teachers in their study felt pressured to "'cover' all of the curriculum to prepare students for the end-of-year, high-stakes exam," and therefore, they did not have time to use formative assessments (p. 957).

Response to Intervention

One policy that affects many teachers' decisions is their school's use of an RTI system to

support students, especially those who have difficulties with academics or behavior (Berkeley et al., 2020). RTI is a framework for teacher decision-making that aspires to give every student the opportunity to work at proficient levels (Venderheyden, 2011), and also a way to address the needs of all students, not just those who are struggling (Burns & Gibbons, 2013; Denton, 2012; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Dougherty Stahl, 2011). Instruction and interventions are typically broken up into three tiers.

Tier I involves all children in the class receiving the core reading instruction. In Tier I, teachers differentiate reading instruction to meet individual students' needs and then assess all students to check for progress. When a teacher notices that a student is not achieving adequate growth in reading with Tier I reading instruction according to assessment data, the teacher must decide how the student would best be supported: through a different intervention, additional time in the same intervention, or placement in Tier II interventions.

Tier II interventions are typically small groups that meet daily in addition to the core reading program and are progress-monitored once or twice a month. These groups are often led by the classroom teacher, an educational assistant, or a reading specialist. If students still do not make adequate progress after a specified time in Tier II interventions, the teacher again must decide how the student would best be supported: through a different intervention, additional time in the same intervention, or placement in Tier III interventions. Tier III interventions are even more focused than Tier II interventions and are provided by personnel with specialized training such as special education teachers or reading specialists.

The first tier, and the most important part of RTI, ensures that all students are receiving evidence-based (Barth et al., 2008) or standards-based instruction (Painter & Alvarado, 2008) in

the classroom. Evidence-based instruction refers to using instructional methods that have been validated by experimental or quasi-experimental research (Fuchs et al., 2014), and standards-based instruction is instruction focused on the state standards. If this is happening, then fewer children should need tiers two and three.

Within most school district RTI flowcharts or process charts, teacher decisions are limited by conditional process statements such as, "*If* screener data is below expectation, *then* the general education teacher provides differentiated instruction" (see Appendix A for a sample school district RTI flow map). These conditional statements determine what steps teachers will take to help children who are having reading difficulties, thus removing teacher responsibility for making decisions regarding who receives Tier II and -three interventions, the intensity of interventions, and which faculty member will provide the interventions. RTI is a "series of measurements and decisions within an iterative process that leads to a final decision about whether a child has had an adequate response to intervention" (Vanderheyden, 2011, p. 336). However, school district RTI processes do not always guide teachers in making individualized decisions while planning for individualized instruction, implementing those plans, and assessing students.

Effective teaching requires in-the-moment decision-making based on student responses to instruction as well as other student behaviors (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018; Griffith et al., 2018; Pitkäniemi, 2010). RTI holds teachers accountable for providing instruction and intervention, but it does not ensure that teachers' decisions within those lessons are appropriate for the students who are having reading difficulties. Fuchs and Deshler (2007), like other researchers, advocated for professional development for teaching reading but added that for schools to

effectively implement RTI, they need engaged administrators who "set expectations for adoption and implementation of RTI, provide the necessary resources, and support the use of procedures that ensure fidelity of implementation" (p. 131). RTI requires all educational stakeholders to work closely together (Vaughn, et al., 2008).

Administrators

Strong leadership is essential for the successful implementation of RTI in schools (Vaughn, et al., 2008). According to Bean and Lillenstein (2012), there are three requirements for principals: "(1) be involved in the implementation efforts; (2) establish conditions for change with opportunities for shared leadership and collaboration; (3) establish the school as a place of learning for teachers and students" (p. 499). Notice that in each of these requirements, principals share responsibilities for implementation and leadership with teachers. Bean and Lillenstein (2012) also suggested that the principals' role in RTI includes "empowering others" and "establishing the conditions for success" (p. 493). These suggestions were mirrored in a study by Printy and Williams (2015), who recommended that principals must "(a) stay closely connected to instructional concerns, and (b) invite teachers to share in the decision-making required to implement the instructional program" to promote "high quality instruction and high student performance" in RTI (p. 201).

Schwille et al. (1980) demonstrated that teachers are impacted by *hierarchical influences* and *other influences*, which would include district and school administration. According to their framework, these influences affect teacher decisions while also directly and indirectly influencing the content covered in classrooms (i.e., what is taught and how it is

taught). In the frameworks for teacher decision-making of Bransford et al. (2005) and Ruppar et al. (2015), teacher decisions are made within the larger context of the school community.

Numerous other researchers have indicated the influence of administration on teachers and literacy instruction in schools. In one study, Fletcher et al. (2013) found that two of the factors that had the most influence on improving literacy education and development in a multicultural, low-socioeconomic school were effective and collaborative school leadership and the school leadership's support for school-wide behavior management. In another study by Matsumura et al. (2009), principals' support for literacy coaches and coaching led to increased engagement between teachers and coaches.

Knowledge and Beliefs about Students, Teaching, and Learning Influence Decision-Making

All of the teacher decision-making frameworks that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter reference the influence of teachers' knowledge and beliefs on their decision-making. Schoenfeld (2011) wrote that,

> It goes without saying that the teacher's knowledge (more broadly, the set of intellectual, material, and contextual resources available to the teacher) is fundamental in shaping the teacher's decision-making. What a teacher can or cannot do in the classroom is clearly a function of what he or she knows, what material and other resources are available, and what constraints are in place (e.g., state or district testing mandates, available texts, and so on). (p. 10)

Teachers are influenced by their content knowledge and knowledge of reading pedagogy, knowledge of learners and their development, and their teaching experiences (Bransford et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018; Pitkäniemi, 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015; Schwille et al., 1980). I discuss each of these three influences on teachers' decision-making in this section.

Content Knowledge and Knowledge of Reading Pedagogy

Shulman (1986) defined content knowledge as "the amount and organization of knowledge per se in the mind of the teacher" (p. 6). Pedagogical content knowledge refers to a teacher's knowledge on how to present content to make it understandable to students, taking into consideration the students' ages or backgrounds, regardless of whether the content is easy or difficult (Shulman, 1986).

Using the classroom teacher to provide whole-class effective reading instruction and in-class reading interventions for those students who need that extra instruction is key to helping every student become a successful reader (Bratsch-Hines, et al., 2017; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Because of this, teachers must be confident in their knowledge on how to teach these readers, especially in a context where RTI is the school's policy for meeting the needs of all readers. "If RTI is to realize its promise, it is critical that more emphasis be placed on understanding the nature and characteristics of instruction that are effective in reducing the incidence of early reading difficulties and on how to help teachers become more effective in this regard" (Scanlon et al., 2008, p. 347). In this section, I present research on content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge that lead to effective literacy instruction, which supports the assertion that teachers' knowledge and beliefs about teaching reading influence their instructional decision-making.

Content Knowledge and Teacher Decisions

What is effective literacy instruction? This question has been debated for decades in our country, and is still debated today (Shanahan, 2020). The NRP (2000) assessed the status of research-based knowledge on how to teach children to read. The Panel's report included five

elements they believed were essential for high-quality reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. They also included professional development for teachers as a component of high-quality instruction.

This report became the basis for policy decisions on what reading instruction should include, and states encouraged school districts to refer to the Panel report when updating their curriculum (Shanahan, 2005). In Texas, where most of the participants of the present study teach, the state standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills; TEKS) include the NRP's five components of effective literacy instruction. For example, one foundational language standard states that, "[t]he student develops word structure knowledge through phonological awareness, print concepts, phonics, and morphology to communicate, decode, and spell" (Texas Education Agency, 2021). What knowledge would a teacher need to possess to teach even one of these components? In third grade, this standard requires a student to "decode multisyllabic words with closed syllables; open syllables; VCe syllables; vowel teams, including digraphs and diphthongs; r-controlled syllables; and final stable syllables" (TEKS §110.5(b).2.ii). To teach just this standard, a teacher would require an understanding of syllable types and the phonic "rules" that accompany them. They would also need to know how to teach syllable types to third graders and how to present this information in multiple ways for students who do not understand after their first encounter with reading multisyllabic words. Having this knowledge helps teachers to make decisions on what to teach and how to teach it explicitly and systematically for improving students' reading achievement (McCutchen, Harry, et al., 2002; Moats & Foorman, 2003). This can also help teachers to assess students (Box et al., 2015; Glogger-Frey et al., 2018; Herppich et al., 2018) and interpret assessment data to plan for

targeted instruction (Moats & Foorman, 2003).

Pedagogical Content Knowledge and Teacher Decisions

In a summary of the National Reading Research Center's project on the nature of outstanding primary-level literacy instruction, researchers compiled a list of pedagogical knowledge that has been demonstrated to result in "outstanding" literacy instruction (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997). These qualifications are:

- Instructional balance (explicit skills instruction using rich literature)
- Instructional density (highly effective teachers show most of the instructional practices in every lesson that are most effective)
- Extensive use of scaffolding
- Encouragement of self-regulation
- Thorough integration of reading and writing activities
- High expectations for all students
- Awareness of purpose

This list is for meeting the needs of all readers. Yet, do teachers need to provide different literacy instruction for students who have difficulty reading? Torgesen's (2002) research on preventing reading difficulties suggested three critical elements for children at risk of reading difficulties: (1) teachers must teach more explicitly for at-risk children than for children who come to school with knowledge of letters and their sounds; (2) instruction must be more intensive, which is best done by providing more teaching and learning opportunities for these children; and (3) teachers must provide more support for at-risk children (pp. 15-17). "To maximize reading growth, children at risk for reading difficulties must receive both strong classroom instruction in reading and more intensive, explicit, and supportive preventive

instruction" (Torgesen, 2002, p. 20). Additionally, Allington (2009) indicated that readers who are struggling to meet grade-level criteria in reading need to receive high-quality lessons all day long, not simply during a 30-minute reading intervention.

The qualifications for meeting the needs of all readers presented by these researchers (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997; Torgesen, 2002; Allington, 2009) claim that teacher content and pedagogical knowledge about teaching reading lead to effective literacy instruction. If teachers lack knowledge on balanced instruction, the use of scaffolding, how to integrate reading and writing activities, or one of the other elements of effective literacy instruction, they may not make instructional decisions that lead to effective literacy instruction. Teachers' knowledge of teaching reading and of how students learn to read has been demonstrated by other scholars to impact instructional decisions, thus leading to improved student learning (McCutchen, Abbott, et al., 2002; McCutchen, Harry, et al., 2002; Piasta et al., 2009; Podhajski et al., 2009).

Effective Literacy Teachers' Decision-Making

Both Torgesen (2002) and Allington (2009) have argued that children require high-quality instruction all day long, and children who have difficulty with reading require even more support from high-quality teachers. Research has indicated that having a high-quality teacher may be more crucial for student achievement than other aspects of schooling (Holdaway, 1984; Mendro, 1998; Sanders et al., 1997).

Many researchers have attempted to define the characteristics of an effective teacher (e.g., Block et al., 2002; Valli et al., 2012). The International Literacy Association (ILA), formerly known as the International Reading Association (IRA; 2000), compiled a research-based list of

characteristics of excellent reading teachers:

- They understand reading and writing development and believe all children can learn to read and write.
- They continually assess children's individual progress and relate reading instruction to children's previous experiences.
- They know a variety of ways to teach reading, when to use each method, and how to combine the methods into an effective instructional program.
- They offer a variety of materials and texts for children to read.
- They use flexible grouping strategies to tailor instruction to individual students.
- They are good reading 'coaches' (that is, they provide help strategically).

Lists such as this one can serve as a lens for viewing the types of decisions that effective teachers make when teaching reading.

ILA's list was developed 20 years ago, but scholars such as Fountas and Pinnell (2018) still believe these qualities to be important. Fountas and Pinnell asserted that there are four areas in which literacy teachers must be experts. First, they must know how to be observers and how to assess students' progress. Second, teachers need to understand what it means to be a proficient reader, writer, and speaker. Third, teachers must also be experts in using many research-based instructional practices. Finally, teachers should have "a deep knowledge of texts, their characteristics, and their demands" (p. 10). These needs have been confirmed by many other researchers (e.g., Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Bratsch-Hines et al., 2017; Pressley et al., 2002). Examining both lists (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018 and IRA, 2000), one can see the types of decisions that teachers make when planning, implementing, and assessing; for example, how to assess children's individual progress, which method of reading instruction to use, which texts to use, and how they will group their students to differentiate instruction. However, many

teachers are not prepared to make these decisions (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2017; Collins & Ferri, 2016; Feinberg & Shapiro, 2009; Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014; Wagner et al., 2017). Lacking the types of knowledge that characterize "excellent reading teachers" (IRA, 2000) or "outstanding literacy instruction" (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997) can influence teachers' decision-making.

One way that teacher decision-making is influenced by a lack of content or pedagogical knowledge in literacy is through assessment decisions. Novice teachers are sometimes unprepared to make decisions on students' learning because they do not possess enough knowledge on assessment practices and methods (Maclellan, 2004). In Maclellan's study, novice teachers' knowledge about assessments did not include how to write test questions or determine the quality of a test, how to administer a test efficiently and fairly, how to use different modes of assessment to allow students to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills, or how to use "practical" or oral assessments (p. 530).

Knowledge of Learners and Their Development

Knowledge of learners and their development has been identified by scholars as critical to effective teaching (Moats & Foorman, 2003; Tomlinson et al., 2003; Vaughn, et al., 2020, p. s300). Effective teachers respond to students' needs, strengths, and interests rather than relying on a program or instructional approach that has been "validated" by research for making instructional decisions (Collins & Ferri, 2016). Effective teachers use adaptive teaching: they are "flexible and skilled at teaching reading, using knowledge of reading acquisition and embedding instruction within students' instructional needs and their rich literacies, cultures, and backgrounds" to meet individual students' needs (Vaughn, et al., 2020, p. s300).

Research has demonstrated that differentiating instruction is an effective evidence-based practice for meeting students' reading needs (Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) suggested that there are six common characteristics of effective differentiation. Notice the types of knowledge about individual students as well as teaching reading that are required, according to these researchers, for effective differentiation: (1) teachers have an in-depth knowledge of students' literacy strengths, needs, and interests; (2) teachers monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly; (3) teachers have in-depth knowledge of the reading process and evidence- or research-based practices for instruction and assessment; (4) teachers use the "core curriculum more flexibly and creatively than the publisher recommends"; (5) teachers provide explicit and systematic reading instruction; and (6) teachers have classroom procedures that support their use of small groups while other students are engaged in reading routines (p. 313).

According to Watts-Taffe et al.'s (2012) list of common characteristics of effective differentiation and the following statement from Moats and Foorman (2003), before teachers can differentiate instruction, they require a clear understanding of reading instruction and reading development.

> Fundamental to differentiated instruction in basic reading skill is the teacher's insight into what causes variation in students' reading acquisition and the ability to explain concepts explicitly, to choose examples wisely, and to give targeted feedback when errors occur. Knowledge of language structure, language and reading development, and the dependence of literacy on oral language proficiency are prerequisite (but not sufficient) for informed instruction of reading. (Moats & Foorman, 2003, p. 38)

Differentiating instruction is an effective evidence-based practice, but not a simple task for teachers for reasons such as the extra work required on the teacher's part, the extra time required to plan and implement instruction, teachers' insufficient knowledge on how to

differentiate or interpret and use data, teachers' heightened anxiety, and teachers' perception that their expertise is not valued over a test (Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016; Puzio et al., 2020; Valli & Buese, 2007). Teachers' decisions on how to differentiate are often controlled by district and school policies that set conditions for teachers' decisions such as mandatory time requirements that break up core instruction (e.g., when specialists remove children from the classroom for interventions) and curriculum adoptions that limit teachers' decisions on how to teach (Valli & Buese, 2007).

Teaching Experience

Jordan et al. (2018) evaluated the association of teacher content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge with the "relationships between reading methods courses, education level, teaching experience, and knowledge of reading" (p. 196). They found that teaching experience was the only teacher characteristic to be significantly associated with teacher content knowledge. Other research has indicated that teachers' experiences help to form their beliefs about teaching and students, including their experiences as K-12 students and undergraduates (Bryan & Abell, 1999; Friedrichsen et al., 2009). As teachers gain experience, they become able to adjust their instructional decisions to align with their beliefs about student learning. For example, in a study completed by Bryan and Abell (1999), a student teacher experienced tension between what she believed about best practices in teaching and her actual teaching practice, which was largely influenced by her own experiences as a student. As she progressed through her internship, she reflected on how she could begin to shift towards making teaching decisions that more closely reflected her beliefs about how students learn best.

Pitkäniemi (2010) found “no evidence of a linear association between years of experience and teachers’ relative effectiveness” (p. 165), which he attributed to teachers’ unwavering views of teaching and learning; moreover, Bond and Dykstra (1998) found no correlation between teacher experience and student reading success.

Self-Efficacy Influences Decision-Making

Even though research has obtained mixed findings on the influence of teachers’ experience and the effectiveness of teachers’ instruction, Bandura (1997) stated that a correlation exists between a person’s experiences and self-efficacy. This section on self-efficacy includes discussions on self-efficacy in teaching, the use of data to make instructional decisions, and the development of expertise through professional development.

Self-Efficacy in Teaching

In Ruppar et al.’s (2015) framework, self-efficacy is one of two internal factors that influence decision-making that are not found in other decision-making frameworks, with the other factor being teachers’ expectations of and for students. These factors came from Ruppar et al.’s research with special education teachers. Special education teachers who believed that their students could meet literacy goals had higher self-efficacy in teaching literacy. This affect has been discussed by other researchers as well (e.g., Ashton & Webb, 1986; Lee et al., 1991). Teachers who considered themselves to possess adequate knowledge for teaching literacy to children with special needs felt more self-efficacious and assumed greater responsibility for making instructional decisions and providing instruction to help their students become more literate. Those who did not feel they had adequate knowledge looked to people who they

considered “experts” for help and then adopted those experts’ practices rather than adapting their own.

Self-efficacy in teaching is generally defined as the belief that “the teacher can help even the most difficult or unmotivated students” (Berman et al., 1977, p. 136). Teachers develop efficacy through multiple sources. Bandura (1997) stated that there are four primary sources from which self-efficacy beliefs are constructed:

1. Enactive mastery experiences – experiences that result in a feeling of being successful, especially in tasks that were perceived as difficult and that required notable effort.

2. Vicarious experiences – experiences that are modeled by others who one considers to have similar abilities and skills to oneself, which can be used to compare one’s own abilities for determining “success” or the likelihood of being successful oneself.

3. Verbal persuasion and allied types of social influences – when others who one respects express their belief in one’s capability to accomplish something, especially in the early stages of development.

4. Physiological and affective states – feelings of stress and other negative emotions might seem to indicate that one is not capable of accomplishing a task (p. 79-115).

Of these sources of efficacy, Bandura found that enactive mastery experiences are the most influential on efficacy. These enactive mastery experiences can also alter efficacy beliefs that were constructed from other sources. For example, Bandura mentioned that people who are affected by high levels of stress on occasions where they feel a sense of low self-efficacy can overcome this stress with positive enactive mastery experiences.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) studied teacher self-efficacy differences between novice and experienced teachers. Their findings indicated that the availability of teaching resources significantly impacted novice teachers’ self-efficacy but not that of experienced teachers. Similarly, verbal persuasion, which included the support of administration, colleagues,

parents, and members of the community, was impactful for novice teachers but not experienced teachers. Finally, they found that the support of administrators had no impact on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, either novice or experienced. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy believed this to be because the teachers in their study rarely received meaningful feedback from their principals.

Unlike Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007), other research has reported that principal leadership positively impacts teacher efficacy (e.g. Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Lee et al., 1991). Another valuable finding by Lee et al. (1991) was that "allowing teacher autonomy in their classroom practices" is crucial for teacher self-efficacy. However, Lee et al. found that the strongest influence on teacher efficacy was having a supportive community that shares "beliefs and values about the central mission of the school and where they feel accepted and respected" (p. 204).

Using Data for Instructional Decisions

Watts-Taffe et al.'s (2012) characteristics of effective differentiation listed in the discussion on *Knowledge of Learners and Their Development* rely on understanding students' current levels, including their strengths and areas of need. This implies that to implement differentiated instruction, teachers must understand how to make data-driven decisions. However, current research suggests that teachers are underprepared to make data-driven decisions (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015) because of the many skills required to effectively collect, analyze, and use data for instructional decisions (Brookhart, 2011). Datnow and Hubbard (2015) suggested that in order to effectively use data to make instructional decisions, literacy teachers

require a deep understanding of the curriculum standards, how students learn to read, and how to teach reading.

An essential component of RTI is the use of data from assessments to determine whether students are responding to interventions. Typically, schools use assessments to determine whether a child has met his or her academic goals. Assessments include both universal screenings and repeated progress-monitoring. Barth et al. (2008) argued that RTI's success cannot be determined or regulated if there are no criteria to ascertain a child's response or lack of response to instruction. Their research revealed that teachers who were provided intensive professional development were better able to identify response or nonresponse to instruction. Teachers are more likely to use data to design instruction if the school's culture makes this a priority (Abrams et al., 2016). Not only that, but research demonstrated that teachers' capacity for making data-based decisions is developed through collaboration with colleagues and administrators (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015). Furthermore, Goddard and Kim (2018) found a "statistically significant connection between teacher collaboration and teachers' reports that they differentiated instruction and between differentiated instruction and teacher efficacy" (p. 2).

Studies have demonstrated that teachers are not always prepared to make decisions on how to differentiate instruction for children who have difficulty meeting grade-level expectations in reading (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2017; Collins & Ferri, 2016; Feinberg & Shapiro, 2009; Wagner et al., 2017). Additionally, some teachers base their interactions with students on criteria that are unrelated to reading ability. For example, teachers have been found to alter instruction with ethnic minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds,

and also to overestimate the literacy performance of girls (Mertzman, 2008; Ready & Wright, 2011). Teachers also interact with students differently based on physical and socioeconomic characteristics; specific examples include interrupting students more often while they are reading and relying more on phonics and accuracy rather than comprehension and meaning (Mertzman, 2008).

Bratsch-Hines et al. (2017) studied teacher decision-making when working with children who are having reading difficulties, and demonstrated that teachers had difficulty choosing appropriate levels of support as well as appropriate interventions for children who exhibited difficulties in both decoding and vocabulary/oral language. They were better able to determine appropriate instruction when students had only one area of need. These teachers relied on more code-focused instruction than meaning-focused instruction, but teachers with more experience and knowledge of reading made more appropriate choices on how to work with their students. Feinberg and Shapiro (2009) also determined that teachers have trouble accurately predicting student performance on assessments and tend to overestimate oral reading fluency.

Data are not useful unless teachers know how to interpret and use them based on their professional knowledge. By looking more closely at Watts-Taffe et al.'s (2012) characteristics of effective differentiation, we can see that Datnow and Hubbard's (2015) suggestions are also reflected in the list. Multiple studies have found that professional development on using data to make decisions about instruction significantly improved student achievement due to teachers' increased capacity for making data-driven decisions (e.g., Lai & McNaughton, 2016; Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016). In a study by Marsh et al. (2010), statistical significance existed – albeit

slight – in the relationship between increased coaching around data-driven instruction and student achievement.

Professional Development

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the influence of teacher content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge on teachers' instructional decision-making (McCutchen et al., 2002; Piasta et al., 2009). Research has indicated that teacher content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge in reading affect student reading outcomes (McCutchen, Harry, et al., 2002; Moats & Foorman, 2003). Consequently, improving teacher knowledge through professional development can also affect student reading outcomes (Hudson et al., 2021). Professional development is also required to build teachers' capacity for assessing students' literacy and for developing assessments that are based on literacy research (Cooper et al., 2017; Mertler, 2009). Because the role of a teacher is so complex, as is teaching reading, professional development is essential for meeting the needs of all readers (Jones et al., 2012; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014).

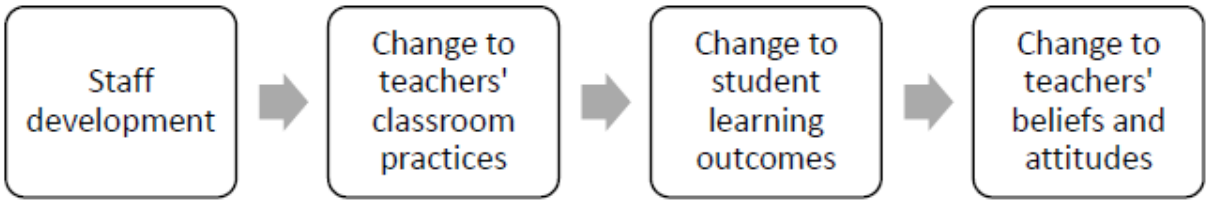
Having the classroom teacher provide Tier II interventions may be cost-efficient and simpler for schools, but there is definitely a question of quality and effectiveness when children have intervention groups in the classroom, as I discussed previously. Even if teachers are provided with a curriculum for their interventions, they may not know how to adapt the curriculum for their students' needs (Troyer, 2019). Denton (2012) made a good point when she wrote the following: "If classroom teachers are to provide effective Tier II intervention during the school day, they will likely need substantial professional development and ongoing support in the implementation of scientifically validated reading intervention programs and in effective

classroom management strategies" (p. 236). Why is classroom management important? A study by Brokamp et al. (2019) reported that "better task-focused behavior, emotional stability, and compliant behaviors" had the strongest relationship with students' reading performance (p. 4).

Fitzharris et al. (2008) found that educational level, professional development in literacy, and responsibility for teaching beginning readers "contributed more to a teacher's level of literacy knowledge than years on the job" (p. 390). However, Guskey's (1986) model of the process of teacher change (Figure 2.5) presents an argument that professional development leads to changes in teachers' beliefs and attitudes about teaching if, as a result of professional development, the teacher sees positive changes in student learning outcomes.

Figure 2.5

Model of the Process of Teacher Change



Note. Guskey's (1986) model of the process of teacher change indicates that if staff development leads to a change in teachers' classroom practices, student outcomes will change. When teachers see that their change in practices has affected students positively, they will change their beliefs and attitudes.

If Guskey's model of teacher change is correct, then teachers who attend professional development and do not see student growth may not make permanent changes to their instruction. There is strong evidence that providing both professional development and coaching, rather than just one without the other, results in higher-quality teacher instructional practices (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011; Hudson et al., 2021; Lieber et al., 2009; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). One-on-one professional development, such as that provided by coaching,

can personalize teachers' learning and provide a "safe" environment to learn in (Clark et al., 2018). Castillo et al. (2016) also found that intensive professional development and coaching significantly increased teachers' perceived skills in implementing interventions and working with data.

Conceptual Framework

Whereas some researchers believe that a conceptual framework is simply a "visual representation of a study's major theoretical tenets" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 6) or is synonymous with a theoretical framework, my conceptual framework is presented using a diagram (Figure 2.6) to show the complexity of teachers' literacy decisions. This complexity led me to design a qualitative study that provided an opportunity to talk to teachers about their experiences with teaching readers. Ravitch and Riggan argued that a conceptual framework is "a grounded argument about why the topic of a study matters to its various and often intersecting fields, why the methodological approach used to explore that topic is valid, and the ways in which the research design is appropriate and the methods are rigorous" (p. 39-40). In this section, I provide evidence for two of these areas, namely why the study matters and the ways in which the research design is appropriate. In Chapter 3, I address the methodology and methods.

Why This Study Matters

This study was conducted primarily with teachers in Texas, a state faced with dire statistics on reading proficiency. The Texas Commission on Public School Finance Report from 2018 stated that only 58% of Texas students come to school kindergarten ready, and in 2018

only four in ten students met the state's third-grade reading standard on the state's standardized assessment (STAAR). In the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, Texas children ranked 46th in the country in fourth-grade reading proficiency – a decline of five spots since their 2015 ranking. The state is taking major steps to ensure that teachers are trained to meet the reading instruction needs of students through reading academies and coaching. As described in my literature review, scholarly research indicates that that teacher decisions are affected by many influences. The present study sheds some light on the influences on teachers' decision-making before these reading academies begin.

Appropriateness of the Research Design

I chose to conduct a qualitative study to answer the question of what influences the decisions that literacy teachers make when working readers, especially children who are having reading difficulties. Yin (2011) explained that qualitative research is the most appropriate type of research for considering the "contextual conditions" that influence the lives of humans (p. 8). Teacher decisions about instruction and assessment are made within the context of a particular school or school district, and those contexts are necessary to consider when studying teacher decision-making.

Teaching and decision-making are complex systems, as I have demonstrated through my discussion on decision-making frameworks and the many factors that influence teacher decisions. Qualitative research allowed me to gather information from multiple sources and differing viewpoints about what happens in a "real life" context (reading classrooms), and how those contexts are influenced or altered in some way by the community of educators.

In my literature review, I described several decision-making frameworks that could align

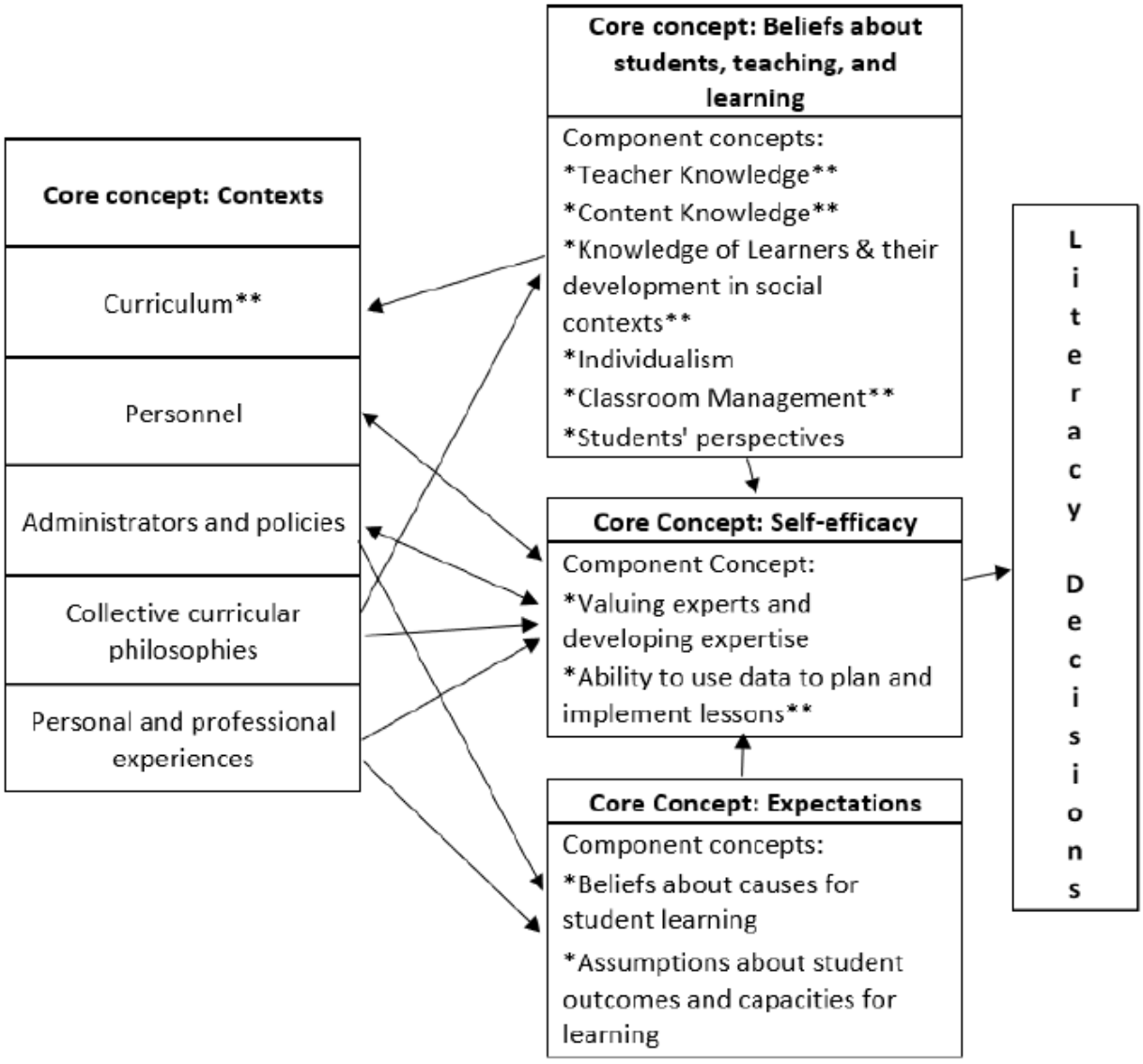
with my research question. To guide my study, I used Ruppar et al.'s (2015) preliminary theoretical framework for teacher decision-making in literacy (Figure 2.3) with elements added from other decision-making frameworks or altered based on research on teacher decision-making. Specifically, I added *teacher knowledge, content knowledge,* and *knowledge of learners and their development in social contexts* (Bransford, et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018) as well as *classroom management* (Fletcher et al., 2013) to the core concept of *beliefs about students, teaching, and learning*. I also added *ability to use data to plan and implement lessons* (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015) under the core concept of *self-efficacy*. I made two changes to the core concept of *contexts*. In Ruppar et al.'s framework, one core context was *staff and materials*, which is based on high-needs special education rooms that have educational assistants and specialized materials for these learners. I changed this to *curriculum*. The final change was removing *professional development* from *contexts*. I felt that this was redundant based on the self-efficacy concept of *valuing experts and developing expertise*.

My reason behind using the visual in Figure 2.6 of the interaction of contexts and concepts that influence decision-making was that it includes several concepts that other frameworks do not include: specifically, teachers' self-efficacy and expectations of and for students. It also includes the external influences that research shows influence teacher decisions (e.g. Bransford et al., 2005; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Griffith, et al., 2013; Jones, et al., 2012; Shavelson & Stern, 1981): curriculum, administration, policies, experience, and professional development. According to the research discussed in my literature review, these concepts play a role in how teachers make decisions within the RTI framework. I used this framework as a reference when looking for recurring concepts and ideas in the data I

collected and analyzed, and these led me to determining five key findings, or themes, in my data.

Figure 2.6

Visualization of the Conceptual Framework of this Study



Note. This study's conceptual framework was based on Ruppar et al.'s (2015) preliminary theoretical framework of how special education teachers make decisions in literacy with additions from other researchers' frameworks for teacher decision-making (Bransford, et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018). The arrows show the directionality of influences on decisions. ** Indicates additions or changes made to Ruppar et al.'s (2015) original framework.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influences on the decisions that literacy teachers in kindergarten through Grade 6 make while planning for and implementing individualized instruction and assessment. This research was especially interested in these decisions when teachers are working with children who are having reading difficulties. This chapter provides a description of the methodology used in this research study. I begin by describing how my study changed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Next, I introduce the study design, sampling procedures, and data collection and analysis. Finally, I explain how I established trustworthiness and credibility before sharing the limitations of this study.

Changes in This Study Due to COVID-19

The proposal I created for this study in December 2019 was altered primarily because of COVID-19 school closures in March 2020. My original research question concerned the types of decisions that teachers make when working with students, but because of the school closures, many teachers lost the ability to work directly with students. A complete explanation of the original study design and the work that was completed before the school closures can be seen in Appendix E. Table 3.1 provides a broad overview of the changes between the original research plan and the research that that was actually conducted for this study.

Research Question

What influences kindergarten through sixth-grade literacy teachers' instructional decisions when planning, implementing, and assessing students, especially students who are

experiencing reading difficulties?

Table 3.1

Overview of Changes Between Original Research Plan and This Study.

	Original Research Plan	This Study
Research Question	What decisions do literacy teachers in Grades 3 through 5 make while planning for individualized instruction, implementing those plans, and assessing students – specifically students who have been labeled "below-proficient" readers?	What influences kindergarten through sixth-grade literacy teachers' instructional decisions when planning, implementing, and assessing students, especially students who are having reading difficulties?
Participants	Grades 3–5 general education teachers in a single school	Elementary literacy teachers recruited through social media from school districts primarily in Texas
Conceptual Framework	Framework based on Ruppar et al.'s (2015) preliminary theoretical framework of literacy decision-making	Same
Institutional Review Board	December of 2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of North Texas approved my original research plan	With guidance from my dissertation chair and other committee members, my IRB was revised and resubmitted on March 24, 2020, and approved on April 28.
Data Collection	Teacher notes on their work with "below-proficient" readers; teacher reflections on work with students; survey on teachers' theoretical orientation (TORP); interviews	Survey on TORP; survey based on original interview questions; interviews
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis	Same

Research Design

This was an interpretive qualitative study, which Merriam (2002) explained as being a type of study used to "discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldview of the people involved or a combination of these" (p. 6). According to Merriam, interpretive qualitative research has three features: (1) "data are collected through interviews,

observations, or document analysis"; (2) "data are inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data"; and (3) "a rich, descriptive account of the findings is presented and discussed, using references to the literature that framed the study in the first place" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6-7). Qualitative design was appropriate for this study as it examined current teachers' experiences in diverse schools primarily in the state of Texas. These teachers ranged from first-year teachers to teachers with over 20 years of experience. The goal of this study was not to make generalized statements about all teachers but rather to collect insights on influences over teacher decisions that will add to the current research on teachers' literacy instructional decisions.

Qualitative research allowed me to hear views and perspectives from multiple teachers in varying contexts. These insights could help to explain why some teachers are more proficient than others in supporting children who do not meet proficiency standards in reading, and also what supports are required for those teachers who are less proficient. They also allowed me to see what forces impact teachers when they make decisions about planning for instruction and interventions, implementing those plans, and assessing student progress.

This information is critical for understanding the current status of reading education. Through the quantitative data available from sources such as international, federal, and state education agencies and based on standardized assessments, too many children are known to not be meeting proficiency standards in reading.

It is reasonable to question the role of teachers in response to the alarming statistics I shared in Chapter 2, but then one would also need to consider what forces impact teachers' instruction and their decision-making when working with young readers. This is the reality of

being a teacher: one's decisions are influenced by the policies written by lawmakers, by the priorities of those with influence in the school districts, and by the community in which one teaches and lives.

Sampling Procedures and Rationale

Participants

This research focused on teachers in elementary schools who teach literacy in kindergarten through sixth grade. Having participants with experience teaching in kindergarten through sixth grade provided a more wholistic picture of teacher decision-making in teaching reading than if I had only interviewed teachers in primary elementary or upper elementary. Teachers in the primary grades typically have different resource and support systems for teaching reading than teachers in the upper grades. For example, teachers in kindergarten through second grade typically have access to multiple instructional programs for meeting the requirements of the reading curriculum. These programs, if based on research, guide teachers through research-based methods for teaching beginning readers (Slavin et al., 2009). Some of these teachers also have access to interventions and interventionists that are unavailable to upper-elementary teachers, such as Reading Recovery, a program that serves first-graders.

Reading programs in third through sixth grade focus less on beginning reading instruction (Slavin et al., 2009); therefore, teachers must rely more on their own understanding of reading acquisition and intervention if they have readers who are at beginning stages in reading. Additionally, reading difficulties often appear in Grades 3 through 6 as reading tasks and texts become more difficult, which is accompanied by increasing expectations for readers and decreasing teacher support. Most schools also reduce the required amount of time allotted

to language arts from 120 minutes daily to 90 minutes daily after second grade, so students spend fewer hours each week completing literacy activities.

The rationale for finding teachers with no limit on years of experience was based on research that places teachers into stages of competency (Block et al., 2002). According to these stages, beginning teachers into their first three years rely more on general educational rules learned in teacher education programs to make decisions in the classroom, but they lack an understanding of what is important. In years three and four, most teachers move into the *competency* stage in which they "(a) set priorities; (b) choose sensible methods for reaching goals; and (c) determine what is relevant to the immediate context from research, philosophies, and methodologies" (Block et al., 2002, p. 183). After this stage, teaching becomes more automatic and proficient, and therefore, these teachers may have more difficulty verbalizing why they make the decisions that they do. Having participants with unique perceptions and differing experiences was expected to contribute to this study's findings.

Sampling was purposive due to the specific requirements for participation in the study as well as the limited access to classrooms and teachers because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which started when data were being collected. I began the sampling procedures with the intention of focusing specifically on Texas teachers. My rationale for choosing Texas teachers was that these teachers were currently learning about legislation that mandates reading academy attendance for every teacher who teaches kindergarten through fifth grade, and also requires schools to only hire highly trained reading teachers to teach in kindergarten through second grade. Some of these teachers would be attending reading academies over the next 3 years, and others might be concerned about their teaching positions in primary

elementary grades. The topic of reading instruction is at the forefront of conversations in elementary schools in Texas.

To recruit teachers for this study, I used a list of all elementary schools in Texas provided by the Texas Education Agency. I filtered out alternative schools and schools with fewer than 40 students (most of these were specialized campuses that do not serve general education students). I randomly sorted the list using a spreadsheet and chose the first 20 schools to contact the principals. Then, I sent those principals an email of introduction and a letter of consent that explained the study. The email requested their help in sending my survey link to teachers in their school. I continued emailing principals from the randomly generated list until I had emailed 50 principals located in districts across the state. Only two principals responded positively to my request to distribute my online survey to their staff, and I received two interview participants from this process and possibly a few completed surveys.

Because of the lack of response to these emails, the next step for finding participants was to use social media. I used my personal Facebook account to reach out to teacher friends in Texas. Many people shared my post and asked their friends to participate. I also reached out to a Facebook group for Texas English Language Arts teachers and the administrators of the account gave me permission to post my request on their Facebook page. Finally, I requested help from the Texas Association of Literacy Educators (TALE). TALE sent my survey link (this link is explained in the Data Collection section) and study information to their listserv members.

After all of these steps, it became clear that I would have to reach out to teachers outside of Texas because I still had too few participants. Only approximately 20 people had taken the survey, and 9 people volunteered to be interviewed by me.

Table 3.2

Survey Participant Demographics

Participant	Which grade(s) do you currently teach?	Experience: Years at this grade level	Experience - Years Teaching	Certification	Education Level	Context: Where are you currently teaching?	RTI: Clearly defined?	Volunteer for Interview?	Interview Participant Label
P1	K,1st	11+ years	16+	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P2	K	3-5 years	3-5 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P3	1st	1-2 years	3-5 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P4	2nd,3rd	3-5 years	3-5 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes - unsure	Yes	GE_4
P5	2nd	1-2 years	1-2 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Other	No, but similar	Yes	GE_2.2
P6	2nd	11+ years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P7	4th	1-2 years	1-2 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	GE_2
P8	5th	6-10 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	No, but similar	No	
P9	4th	3-5 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	Some Doc.	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P10	5th	3-5 years	16+	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P11	2nd,3rd	3-5 years	6-10 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Charter	No	No	
P12	5th	3-5 years	3-5 years	Alt. Cert.	BA	Charter	Yes	Yes	GE_5
P13	All K-5	11+ years	16+	Std. Cert.	Some Grad.	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	RI_20
P14	All K-5	11+ years	11-15 years	Alt. Cert.	Doc	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P15	5th	1-2 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	GE_12
P16	1st	6-10 years	16+	Std. Cert.	Some Doc.	Other	Yes	Yes	GE_18
P17	1st	11+ years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P18	2nd	3-5 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	GE_13

(table continues)

Participant	Which grade(s) do you currently teach?	Experience: Years at this grade level	Experience - Years Teaching	Certification	Education Level	Context: Where are you currently teaching?	RTI: Clearly defined?	Volunteer for Interview?	Interview Participant Label
P19	All K-5	1-2 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P20	All 1-5	11+ years	16+	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	No, but similar	No	
P21	4th	6-10 years	6-10 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P22	2nd	3-5 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P23	All K-5	1-2 years	1-2 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P24	5th	11+ years	16+	Std. Cert.	Some Doc.	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P25	K	6-10 years	16+	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P26	3rd	1-2 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P27	K	1-2 years	1-2 years	Alt. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes - unsure	No	
P28	4th	3-5 years	11-15 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P29	3rd	3-5 years	16+	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P30	2nd	1-2 years	6-10 years	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P31	5th	6-10 years	16+	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	GE_17
P32	3rd	11+ years	16+	Std. Cert.	Ph.D. or Ed.D	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	GE_8
P33	5th,6th	11+ years	16+	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	RI_23
P34	3rd	3-5 years	6-10 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	
P35	All K-5	6-10 years	16+	Std. Cert.	MA	Trad. Public	No, but similar	No	
P36	3rd	1-2 years	1-2 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	Yes	GE_.5
P37	K	6-10 years	6-10 years	Std. Cert.	BA	Trad. Public	Yes	No	

Table 3.3

*Interview Participant Characteristics**

Name (Pseudonyms and Citation Labels)	Years Teaching	Current Position	Grade Level	Education Level	School Context
Arden (GE_.5)	0.5	Gen. Ed.	2nd	Bachelors	Traditional Public; Low SES; RTI Clearly Defined
Lucy (GE_2)	2	Gen. Ed.	4th	Bachelors	Traditional Public; Low SES; RTI Clearly Defined
Rachel (GE_2.2)	2	Gen. Ed.	2nd	Bachelors	International Baccalaureate Charter School; High ELL; RTI Unsure
Jessica (GE_4)	4	Gen. Ed.	2nd	Masters	International Baccalaureate Public School; High ELL; RTI Unsure
Audrey (GE_5)	5	Gen. Ed.	5th	Bachelors	Charter School; Low SES; High ELL; RTI Clearly Defined; School Improvement Plan
Wendi (GE_8)	8	Gen. Ed.	2nd	Masters, Read. Spec. Cert. & Dyslexia Cert.	Traditional Public; RTI Clearly Defined
Amy (GE_12)	12	Gen. Ed.	1st	Bachelors	Traditional Public; RTI Clearly Defined
Tiffany (GE_13)	13	Gen. Ed.	1st	Bachelors	Traditional Public; Low SES; RTI Clearly Defined
Brett (GE_17)	17	Gen. Ed.	3rd	Masters	Traditional Public; Low SES; RTI Clearly Defined
Katie (GE_18)	18	Gen. Ed.	1st	Masters	French Immersion Charter School; RTI Clearly Defined
Carol (Eliminated)	20	Reading	K-5	Some Grad Work	Traditional Public; Low SES; RTI Clearly Defined
Sue (Eliminated)	23	ReadingDyslexia	5th - 6th	Masters & Reading Specialist Cert.	Traditional Public; Low SES; RTI Clearly Defined

Note. Sorted by years of teaching experience.

I changed my Facebook request to include all elementary teachers, and a few of my colleagues reached out to teachers in Texas and in other states on my behalf. After this, I had 12 volunteers for interviews and 36 surveys that were complete enough to use for this study. A total of 10 of the 12 volunteer interviewees in my study taught in Texas public schools. Table 3.2 presents the demographics of the survey respondents and Table 3.3 lists the interview participants.

After multiple iterations of data analysis, I removed two interviewees who were reading interventionists. The two reading interventionists spoke mostly about how they support teachers rather than how they support students. Removing the interventionists from the participants helped to focus the study on teachers in the classroom who are making decisions on how to support readers in a large-group setting with diverse reading levels. One participant, Tiffany, was chosen as a deviant case to increase confidence in my conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Tiffany had taught literacy in the past, but at the time of our interview, she had been teaching mathematics for 10 years. She was preparing to move into an English Language Arts position the following year; the staff at her school were required to attend frequent professional development on literacy throughout the year regardless of the content taught; and she had started attending professional development and learning about the new literacy program that her district was adopting.

Data Collection

Survey

Qualitative surveys are excellent tools for gathering information on people's experiences, practices, views, and perspectives (Terry & Braun, 2017). With the need to

complete the data collection online, I used the interview questions from my original study to design a survey (see Appendix B) using Qualtrics, an online survey software (Qualtrics.com). A review of the responses to these survey questions informed my interview questions for participants. The participants agreed to be interviewed through this survey.

Research has indicated that teachers' decisions are based in part on their beliefs about students and teaching (e.g. Bransford, et al., 2005; Griffith & Lacina, 2018; Pitkäniemi, 2010). Because of this, I also asked teachers to complete the DeFord Theoretical Orientation in Reading Profile (TORP) survey, which uses a 5-point Likert scale response system to place teachers' beliefs about teaching reading into one of three orientations: phonics, skills, or whole language. The "skills" orientation refers to a balanced literacy approach to teaching reading. This survey contains 28 statements that cover a variety of opinions about teaching reading. Some statements that favor phonics-based reading instruction are as follows: "When children do not know a word, they should be instructed to sound out its parts," and "A child needs to be able to verbalize the rules of phonics in order to assure proficiency in processing new words." These next statements favor a whole-language perspective: "Children's initial encounters with print should focus on meaning, not upon exact graphic representation," and "When coming to a word that's unknown, the reader should be encouraged to guess based upon meaning and go on." The TORP questions were added to the Qualtrics survey.

Before using the survey, I sent the Qualtrics link to four teachers and asked if they could complete the survey and then provide feedback. The feedback was positive, and there were no concerns or questions about the survey; therefore, the Qualtrics survey link was sent out to potential participants as described in the Sampling Procedures section of this paper.

Table 3.4

Survey Questions and Examples of Participants' Answers

Survey Questions	Examples of Participants' Answers
When you think about "below-proficient readers, what things come to mind?	• No phonemic awareness, can't isolate correct phonograms in words, poor spelling, limited comprehension (GE_2) • There is usually an underlying cause. The usual culprits are either a learning disability such as dyslexia or not being proficient in English (ESL students). (GE_5)
What might be the cause of reading difficulties?	• Limited experience with reading, learning the language, limited access to books at home, limited experiences with sight words (GE_2.2) • Lack of instruction in foundational reading skills early on; not being identified early on for a reading or learning disability; not provided the right type or length of intervention (GE_8)
How do you cope with meeting the needs of children with reading difficulties?	• I strive to get to know my students as well as I possibly can. If I can connect with them on a social and personal level, it allows me a better window into identifying what might be the cause of their reading difficulty. Once I have identified a cause I work to make time throughout the day where I can support them in small groups or one-on-one so that I am meeting them at their level and then building up from there. This typically looks like achievement based reading groups, mixed small groups for math, and one-on-one writing conferences. (GE_4) • I hit the phonics HARD. I pull more small groups and tutor after school twice a week. (GE_13) • The needs are met through steps taken to rebuild the foundation of reading (phonics and vocabulary) (GE_17)
What knowledge or resources do you draw on to help you cope with reading difficulties?	• Jan Richardson, Pinterest, Teachers Pay Teachers, more experienced teachers (GE_2). • In addition to courses dealing specifically with reading difficulties and language acquisition, my school has an able team of coaches and aids who work extensively with these readers several times a week. (GE_18)
How confident are you that you can help any reader reach proficiency? Why?	• I feel like I still have a lot of room to grow in this area. Reading is such a large continuum, and I struggled as a reader when I was a kid. I do not feel mildly equipped to teach reading, but I wouldn't call myself a reading teacher. (GE_2.2) • I feel confident that I can help almost any reader. I do not feel I have all the knowledge to help all children. I am limited by knowledge base. I do feel confident that I have resources (including people) who can help me when I come to a child who is not making adequate progress. The question I also wonder, is 'what is proficiency?" I have had children who later identified as 'Intellectually Disabled." I believe they were growing, but not at the same rate accelerated rate other children do with the same level of intervention. (GE_13)

(table continues)

Survey Questions	Examples of Participants' Answers
What policies and procedures does your school campus or school district have in place for identifying and working with children who are struggling in learning to read?	• We use the RtI model, and provide an hour each day for "WIN" (What I Need) time which is used to provide daily intervention. We also provide dyslexia and speech services for identified students. (GE_5) • Students are identified using several data points: teacher anecdotal data, grades, I-Station reports and running records; Students are then compiled into a document by grade level and the students with the most need are admitted into Tier III to see the interventionist (in order to keep groups small); all Tier II students are seen by classroom teachers at a common grade-level time in which speech, dyslexia and Tier III students are pulled from the room and no new instruction is taking place; everything is reassessed at each 9 weeks (or before if necessary) (GE_8)
What data do you use when making decisions about student proficiency in reading? Why do you use this data?	• Our school uses running records and assessments from Fountas and Pinnell and Scholastic. These assessments are used in conjunction with anecdotal, observations, and formative assessments when making decisions about student proficiency. This data is used because our school places a high value on the responsibility and professionalism of the individual teacher. The F&P and Scholastic kits are also used so that there is a consistent measure that is being used school-wide to judge what is considered proficient or not. (GE_4) • I use our district tools (Achieve3000), STAAR scores, and TELPAS ratings, as well as my own observations. Using a variety of data sources helps to make the most informed decisions for students. (GE_5) • I use our district and BAS assessments. These are required. (GE_12)
Have your views on "below-proficient" readers changed after becoming a teacher in this school or school district? If so, how have they changed and why do you think this is?	• Before teaching, I thought below proficient meant not reading on grade level. Now, I feel that you can read on grade level and still be below proficiency and need support in certain areas. An example of this is a child may need more support in fluency growth but have strong comprehension. (GE_2.2) • Before, it was a set thing; if you don't meet this level, you are below proficient. Now, I know there are many factors that could cause a reader to be below proficient—accuracy, fluency, and comprehension being the overall descriptors. (GE_8) • I have many thoughts on the "educational system", labelling students versus supporting the constant growth with these incessant data-driven documents. (GE_17)

Over the 6-week period that the survey was available for, 80 people opened the link. Many people answered a few questions and then ended the survey, but only 36 people completed the open-ended question section of the survey (see Table 3.4 for survey questions and examples of participants' answers).

Of the 36 surveys completed, only two participants fully completed the TORP questions. Because the TORP results in a "total" score that places teachers in a theoretical orientation viewpoint, missing questions affect the validity of the "total" scores. The original purpose of the TORP was to compare teachers' theoretical viewpoints on teaching reading with their teaching practices. With the study redesign, I was unable to work with individual teachers in-depth as expected; therefore, I decided to eliminate the TORP as a research tool for this study, leaving the open-ended questions in the survey and the interviews for my data collection.

Interviews

Participants in the online survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview that would take 30–60 minutes. The interviews were conducted through the video teleconferencing software Zoom (Zoom.com) at times that were convenient for the participant and outside of school hours for teachers who were still teaching virtually. The interviews were designed as a follow-up to clarify and enrich my understanding of participants' survey answers. Before each interview, I used that teacher's survey answers to write a series of questions to clarify survey responses that needed more explanation or questions to encourage participants to expand on their survey answers. The interviews were recorded on Zoom with the participants' permission and transcribed through Zoom. Each interview transcript was then edited by hand for computer errors in transcription. Participants' names were also removed

from the transcripts. Appendix B shows how the survey questions aligned with my research question and purpose. For example, one participant (GE_18) answered the survey question "How do you cope with meeting the needs of children with reading difficulties?" with "Our RTI is very well done, the best I have seen in 18 years." This response led me to ask the following question: "So you told me that RTI at your school is done the best you've ever seen in 18 years, can you tell me more about that?" Other examples of interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

To build rapport with the teacher interviewees before the interviews, I explained my study and told the teachers about my personal experience of teaching reading to elementary school students. I let them know that I wanted to hear many perspectives on how teachers make decisions when working with readers in the classroom. Furthermore, I did not ask teachers to identify where they worked or even the city they lived in. I did not want the teachers to feel that I was asking questions in order to make judgements, and neither did I want them to be concerned that their interviews would be shared with administrators at their school in any way. These measures hopefully encouraged the teachers to be open and honest when I interviewed them, which I believe most of them were.

Data Analysis: Surveys

Qualitative surveys are excellent tools for gathering information on people's experiences, practices, views, and perspectives (Terry & Braun, 2017). The purpose of this survey was primarily to inform the interview questions, to find interview participants, and to collect descriptive data for the participants. The survey also revealed opinions, beliefs, experiences, and knowledge about reading instruction and children who are having reading

difficulties that were helpful in developing my interviews. Even though I did not analyze the survey data and report results, the survey helped me to understand

- Where teachers gain knowledge about teaching reading
- What makes teachers confident/insecure when teaching reading
- Teachers' understanding of how data can drive reading instruction
- How teachers define "below-proficient readers" or children who are having reading difficulties
- Common instructional materials and methods used to meet the needs of readers

This insight helped not only to inform my interview questions but also to understand the issues around teaching reading and literacy teacher decision-making in elementary schools. Consequently, this also helped me with Phase 1 of my inductive analysis, namely familiarizing myself with the data.

Data Analysis: Interviews

In an interpretive qualitative study, data are inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data (Merriam, 2002). However, my research question contained three parts of interest: planning for instruction, the implementation of those plans, and assessment of student learning. Additionally, my conceptual framework indicated that there are four concepts that influence teachers' literacy decisions: (1) contexts; (2) beliefs about students, teaching, and learning; (3) self-efficacy; and (4) expectations. The presentation of this question, along with my conceptual framework, led to a necessary division of data in order to answer the research question. Ultimately, though, the purpose of this study was to determine what influences literacy teachers across all instructional decisions (i.e., what to teach, how to teach it, and how to assess student learning).

Therefore, I applied both deductive and inductive methods of data analysis to the participants' interviews. Deductive analysis was used to answer the following individual questions: What influences teachers' decisions when planning? What influences teachers' decisions when implementing those plans? What influences teachers' decisions when assessing students' learning? The deductive analysis used the three instructional decisions (planning, implementing, and assessing) and four concepts in my conceptual framework (contexts, knowledge and beliefs, self-efficacy, and expectations) as a guide for coding the data. In this section, the process for this deductive analysis is discussed first. Inductive analysis was used to answer my research question as a whole. The results from each of these analyses were used together to discuss the findings of this descriptive qualitative research study.

Deductive Analysis of Interviews

My research question was as follows: What influences kindergarten through sixth-grade literacy teachers' instructional decisions when planning, implementing, and assessing students, especially students who are experiencing reading difficulties? To answer this question, I began with deductive data analysis at primarily a semantic level. A semantic level of data analysis looks primarily at the surface level: what the participants said about teaching reading as well as "patterns in semantic content" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). My deductive codes had "parent codes" for planning, implementing, and assessing with "child codes" of the influences from my conceptual framework (i.e., planning: beliefs: classroom management; implementing: contexts: materials). The purpose of this iteration of coding was to determine which of the influences were most common in planning, which were most common in the implementation of lesson plans, and which influenced assessment decisions. These codes can be seen in Table 3.5, and a

full codebook with descriptions and example quotations can be found in Appendix F. Table 3.5 shows only the "parent code" *Planning*, but the same "child codes" were used for the "parent codes" *Implementing* and *Assessing* as well.

Table 3.5

Deductive Child Codes and Code Groups for "Planning" Parent Code

Child Code	Code Group
Beliefs	Learning
	Students
	Teaching
	Classroom Management
Contexts	Materials
	Admin and Policies
	Curriculum
	Personnel
Expectations	Assumptions about students
	Support
Self-Efficacy	Developing Expertise
	Experience
	Using Data
	Valuing Experts

Inductive Analysis of Interviews

To develop overall themes, I applied inductive thematic analysis to all of the transcripts. "Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For my data analysis, I referenced Braun and Clark's (2006) 6-phase guide to doing thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen for its capacity to describe in rich detail the "patterns of meaning across datasets" (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The six phases suggested by

Braun and Clarke are (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) generating initial themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing them up.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Oneself with the Data

Using a deductive approach to data analysis prior to starting this inductive analysis provided an opportunity to closely read through the data multiple times, organize the information, and record my thoughts in memos. After coding the data deductively, I wrote an account of the findings organized by my research question (what influences planning, implementing, and assessing). As I wrote, I started to consider what my data were telling me about these teachers' experiences: what was important, what was similar across the experiences, and what was different. This aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion of generating an "initial list of ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them" (p. 18). After writing up these results, I wrote the participant vignettes found in Chapter 4. Once I had finished the summary of my findings and the participant vignettes, I was ready to move to Phase 2.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

For this iteration of coding, I analyzed the data at primarily a latent level. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis at the latent level as follows:

> Thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. (p. 13)

Inductive coding is directed by the content of the data rather than by existing concepts or

theories such as deductive coding. Because I had already worked closely with the data and completed the deductive coding, it would be misleading to say that I was able to complete this inductive coding without keeping my conceptual framework or prior analysis in mind. However, because I was looking for latent information in the data, my coding resulted in new concepts such as "student success comes from curriculum decisions" and "data collection builds confidence." The complete inductive codebook can be found in Appendix G.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Once I had completed the initial inductive coding of the interview data, I continued with a second iteration of coding using pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), pattern codes "identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis" (p. 69). An example of this pattern coding is provided in Table 3.6. I grouped the deductive codes into categories through pattern codes that aligned with my conceptual framework to pull together the data analysis from my deductive coding, in which I determined the key influences within planning, implementing, and assessing, as well as from my inductive coding. Table 3.6 includes the codes under the category of "Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs Affect Practice." Then, after carefully reading through each category, I wrote possible themes for each one (see Table 3.7).

Table 3.6

Example of Initial Codes and Pattern Codes for Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs Affect Practice

Original Codes	Description of Codes	Pattern Codes	Description of Pattern Codes
Beliefs about how children learn affect practice	Teachers' beliefs such as - children who are below-proficient readers need additional small group reading instruction - or students who read independently become stronger readers - affect how they teach reading or set up their classroom	Effective reading instruction	The teacher knows and possibly uses effective reading instructional strategies such as using small groups, independent reading, and basing instruction on student data. The teacher understands the value of other reading activities such as independent reading
Differentiating	Teachers differentiate instruction for students depending on ability or data		
Effective reading instruction	The teacher knows and possibly uses effective reading instructional strategies such as using small groups, independent reading, and basing instruction on student data		
Independent reading better than programs	Reading independently can impact students more than using reading programs		
Organization of reading class	Reading class organization such as small groups, working with half of the class at a time, and reading centers		
Teacher knowledge of good reading instruction	Teacher explains "good" reading instruction such as fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction		
Some influences are stronger than beliefs	Teachers understand what effective reading instruction is, but there are other influences that are more influential such as the school district or a program and therefore take priority in decision-making	Some influences are stronger than beliefs	Teachers understand what effective reading instruction is, but there are other influences that are more influential such as the school district or a program and therefore take priority in decision-making
Student background affects teacher decisions	Teachers make decisions based on a student's background such as family life, language proficiency, and financial situation	Teachers' knowledge of students affects decisions	Teachers do not just look at data, but they look at the whole child (e.g. classroom work, behaviors, language proficiency, family situations) to determine strengths, needs and possibilities for growth
Teacher knowledge of students affects confidence	When a teacher does not know the students well, she will not be able to meet their needs		
Teachers' knowledge of students affects decisions	Teachers do not just look at data, but they look at the whole child to determine strengths and needs		

Table 3.7

Example of Developing Themes from Pattern Codes (Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs Affect Practice)

Pattern Code	Description of Pattern Code	Possible Theme
Effective reading instruction	The teacher knows and possibly uses effective reading instructional strategies such as using small groups, independent reading, and basing instruction on student data. The teacher understands the value of other reading activities such as independent reading	Teachers know what good reading instruction looks like but implementing this "good instruction" is often influenced by factors that take precedence over teacher beliefs and knowledge.
Some influences are stronger than beliefs	Teachers understand what effective reading instruction is, but there are other influences that are more influential such as the school district or a program and therefore take priority in decision-making	
Teachers' knowledge of students affects decisions	Teachers do not just look at data, but they look at the whole child (e.g. classroom work, behaviors, language proficiency, family situations) to determine strengths, needs and possibilities for growth	

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

After determining an initial theme for each category, I read through the coded data in each theme to determine whether they appeared to "form a coherent pattern" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). Some of these initial themes had overlapping ideas and data, so I decided to combine them into more concise themes (see Table 3.8).

In Phase 4, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested reading the entire data set again to determine whether the themes fit with the entire set. In completing this step, I especially paid attention to data excerpts that had been eliminated during the pattern coding due to the elimination of one initial code. I evaluated the coded excerpts to determine whether they had

been coded multiple times and would therefore be included in other themes. If they had not, I determined whether they were applicable to other themes.

Table 3.8

Example of Reviewing Themes

Initial Themes	Final Theme Defined
Curriculum is influential to teacher decision-making, and depending on teacher experience, may take precedence over other deciding factors.	Teachers know what excellent reading instruction looks like (e.g. small group differentiated instruction, using data to plan, making decisions during implementation based on students) but implementing this "excellent instruction" is often influenced by factors such as curriculum, teaching experience, and the ability to manage the classroom that take precedence over teacher beliefs and knowledge.
Teacher experience allows different factors to influence teachers' decisions (i.e. novice teachers are more influenced by curriculum while experienced teachers are more influenced by their beliefs and knowledge of children).	

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

At the end of Phase 4, I had five themes. These themes aligned with the data and explained them well. I focused not only on what the data extracts were saying but also on what was interesting about them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In particular, I asked the following questions: “How do these influences affect the teachers?” and “How do these influences interact with each other?” The definitions of these five themes were further refined as I wrote up my findings and discussion to ensure that they would more accurately tell the story of what was happening in my data.

Even though Braun and Clarke (2006) placed “naming themes” in Phase 5, I waited until Phase 6 was complete to give them their names. This enabled me to see how the story unfolded as I wrote up my results, and then I was able to focus on how to make them “concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about” (Braun & Clarke,

2006, p. 23). Table 3.9 presents an example of the thought process involved in naming my themes.

Table 3.9

Example of Thought Process When Naming Themes

Final Theme Defined	Thought Process When Naming Themes	Theme Name
Teachers know what excellent reading instruction looks like but implementing this "excellent instruction" is often influenced by factors such as curriculum, teaching experience, and the ability to manage the classroom that take precedence over teacher beliefs and knowledge.	• What is most important in this theme? Teachers know what excellent instruction is! • What is the point I'm trying to make? This knowledge is not enough to make the excellent instruction happen. • Why? Other factors are more influential.	Decisions based on knowledge of "Excellent Reading Instruction" are supplanted by other influences

Phase 6: Producing the Report

Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation provide the story of my data that Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend for Phase 6 in order to answer my research question.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) prescribed that trustworthiness in naturalistic studies can be established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Even though this study was not a naturalistic study, I used these guidelines to establish trustworthiness. Table 3.10 is a summary of techniques for establishing trustworthiness from Lincoln and Guba's (1985) book on naturalistic inquiry (p. 328). This section describes how I attempted to establish trustworthiness in my study using these four areas with the methods suggested by Lincoln and Guba.

Table 3.10

Techniques for Establishing Trustworthiness

Criterion Area	Technique
Credibility	(1) activities in the field that increase the probability of high credibility (a) prolonged engagement (b) persistent observation (c) triangulation (sources, methods, and investigators) (2) peer debriefing (3) negative case analysis (4) referential adequacy (5) member checks (in process and terminal)
Transferability	(6) thick description
Dependability	7(a) the dependability audit, including the audit trail
Confirmability	7(b) the confirmability audit, including the audit trail
All of the above	(8) the reflexive journal

Note. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) summary of techniques for establishing trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry (p. 328).

Credibility

Construct Validity

According to Maxwell (2009), there are seven strategies for combating threats to validity in a qualitative study: (1) intensive long-term involvement, (2) "rich" data, (3) respondent validation, (4) search for discrepant evidence and negative cases, (5) triangulation, (6) quasi-statistics, and (7) comparison. For this study, I collected multiple sources of evidence: the teacher survey, the questionnaire on teachers' theoretical beliefs about teaching reading, and finally the interviews. These sources established a chain of evidence because each document collected was used to inform the interview questions and discussions with each participant. Finally, I allowed the participants a chance to read through a draft of their interview

transcripts to verify that it captured their words and the intention behind them accurately.

Triangulation of Data

To triangulate the data, I used multiple sources of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I asked the teachers to complete the survey questions to provide me with a picture of their beliefs about readers, reading interventions, and reading instruction as well as their instructional and intervention practices. The interviews were guided by the teachers' answers to these surveys, where the teachers were asked to elaborate and clarify their survey answers.

Peer Review/Debriefing

Once I began analyzing my data, I asked a peer who was also conducting a study on teacher decision-making to code three of my ten interview transcripts. After the first transcript was coded, I compared her coding with mine and found that our codes aligned 67% of the time. We discussed where our coding differed – specifically with the codes *Teacher Agency* and *Relevant PD*. In my coding, I used the code *Teacher Agency* whenever a teacher showed agency (which I later changed to self-efficacy) and when teachers did not show agency (i.e., when they felt like they could not control the situation). I did the same with the code *Relevant PD*, which I used when teachers discussed how important professional development has been to their practice and when they mentioned the need for professional development. In the first transcript used for peer coding, my colleague only used these codes when she saw evidence of teacher agency and relevant professional development. Once we clarified these two codes, our coding aligned approximately 90% of the time, which helped to establish reliability and triangulation.

Transferability

In a study such as this one, external validity cannot be used to establish transferability. Instead, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested using "thick descriptions" so that someone who would like to make a transfer to his or her own inquiry can determine with some accuracy if transfer is possible. Merriam (1988) defined a thick description as a "complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated" (p. 11). I tried to be conscientious about using explicit, descriptive writing so that readers can "see" the research steps and process of analysis.

Limitations

This study was limited due to the small number of participants for representing a large population of teachers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cases. As is known from Ruppar et al.'s (2015) research, teachers often mirror their colleagues when they are uncertain about teaching or meeting the needs of students. Teachers may also make decisions based on administrators' mandates or beliefs. The 12 teachers I interviewed, especially those who had been teaching in their schools for longer, represented not only their personal views and experiences but also those of the school community in which they worked. Because of this, it would be difficult to say that "all novice teachers" or "all teachers in low-income schools" are similarly affected by influences.

Another problem faced in the interviews and surveys was that participants might not have been completely honest when answering the questions. Some participants might have been concerned that I was looking for "right answers" and possibly judging their answers. "[Teacher] self-evaluations have been demonstrated to contain biases, ingratiation, deception,

self-degradation, self-ascension, and a tendency to respond in ways that conformed to dominant cultural mores in a school, district, and nation" (Block et al., 2002, p. 183). I did my best to establish rapport with the participants before interviewing them and to obtain answers that were authentic and unbiased. I believe that most participants were honest and open about their experiences. They expressed feelings of inadequacy and frustration as well as feelings of accomplishment.

I also asked the teachers to examine the interview transcripts before the analysis was conducted to look for transcription errors or to explain anything they may have said in error. This step was intended to make teachers feel more confident that their words were being represented accurately without any manipulation. Teachers were assured that my interview transcripts and other documentation would be kept confidential by using pseudonyms and deleting names and school identifiers from the interview transcripts. Survey participants were not asked for any personal information that could identify them, and interview participants were not asked to identify their school's name or district. The following chapter presents the findings of my study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The research question in this study was as follows: What influences kindergarten through sixth-grade literacy teachers' instructional decisions when planning, implementing, and assessing students, especially students who are experiencing reading difficulties? This chapter begins with the results from the deductive analysis that identified key influencers in planning, implementing, and assessing. Next I share the findings of the inductive analysis that led to the development of five themes. Finally, these themes are illustrated through participant vignettes.

Deductive Analysis Findings

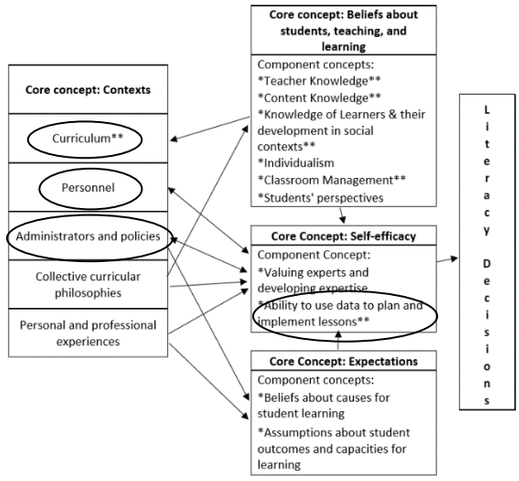
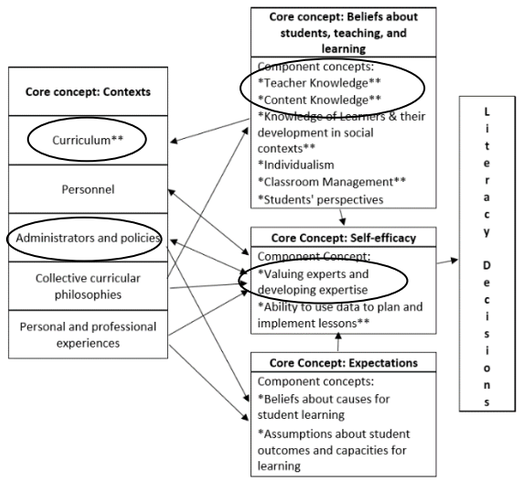
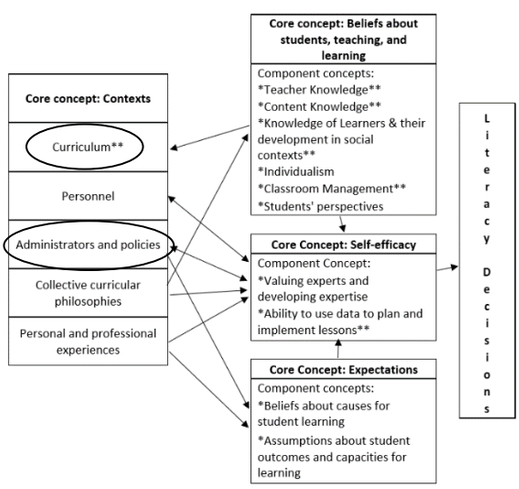
As explained in Chapter 3, the deductive codes were based on my conceptual framework. My conceptual framework divided decision-making influences into four categories: (a) contexts, (b) beliefs about students, teaching, and learning, (c) self-efficacy, and (d) expectations. Each of these influencers appeared in my study to different degrees, which indicated that some were more influential than others. Table 4.1 presents the key influencers within planning, implementation, and assessment.

Inductive Analysis Findings

This section presents my findings from the inductive coding process that I conducted after the deductive coding analysis. My analysis of the inductive coding identified five themes that reached across the data and explained how teachers' decisions are influenced by multiple influencers.

Table 4.1

Key Influences from the Conceptual Framework

Research Activity	Key Influencers from the Conceptual Framework
Planning	Contexts: Curriculum Contexts: Administration and Policy Contexts: Personnel Self-Efficacy: Using Data 
Implementation	Contexts: Curriculum Contexts: Administration and Policy Beliefs: About Teaching and Learning Self-Efficacy: Developing Expertise 
Assessment	Contexts: Curriculum Contexts: Administration and Policy 

The five themes were as follows:

1. Administrators influence teachers' decision-making.
2. Teachers' knowledge of reading instruction influences decision-making.
3. Professional development influences teachers' decision-making.
4. Teachers' beliefs about using data for instruction influence their decision-making.
5. Collaboration influences teachers' decision-making.

Interview participant quotes are cited using GE for general education teachers and then years of experience. Thus, a general education teacher with 5 years of experience would be GE_5. I had two interviewees with 2 years of experience, so one is GE_2 and the other is GE_2.2 (see Table 3.3). Participants' interview quotes have been edited minimally to make them easier to read and understand out of the context in which they were spoken. This editing included removing filler and repeated words, combining partial sentences, and clarifying pronouns. An example of this is presented using the following quote.

> Original: And out of all the, the students, none of the ones that I got for WIN time were my own students from either of my classes. So, and I think that kind of contributed too because you've got, you know, I haven't built a rapport with those students. I don't know that. You know, I see them in the hallways, you know, you know, passing conversations, but I don't actually know what any of those students. I don't know what where their strengths are. I don't know what their weaknesses are. So I think that kind of made it a – I don't think that was a good idea to split them up. You know that way (GE_5).

> Edited: And out of all the students, none of the ones that I got for WIN time were my own students from either of my classes. I think that kind of contributed to… because I haven't built a rapport with those students. I see them in the hallways, you know, passing conversations, but I don't actually know what their strengths are. I don't know what their weaknesses are. So I think that kind of made it a – I don't think that was a good idea to split them up that way (GE_5).

Key Influences within Planning, Implementation, and Assessment: Findings from the Deductive Analysis

Planning

Planning includes everything that happens before implementation. Teachers determine what they will teach, how they will teach it, how they will manage instruction (small groups, whole group, independent work), and who will receive additional instruction or interventions.

Within planning, four concepts from my conceptual framework were key influencers. Three of these were contexts: curriculum (*n* = 10; e.g., We have a pacing guide and it tells us, like what units we're doing what lessons do you have to teach on a certain day and they usually give us like 2 weeks in between each unit [GE_.5]); administration and policy (*n* = 8; e.g., We were told we couldn't deviate from the material we were given. We were given the printouts every week and it would be basically kind of drill and kill [GE_5]), and personnel (*n* = 9; e.g., We have reading coaches, math coaches, technology coaches, we have all of them and they come in, they'll model lessons and do other things with the class and help you plan [GE_13]). Contexts are "the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs" (Contexts, Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Teacher decisions are made within the context of their school and community: who they work with and for, the policies and programs that are in place, the philosophies they and their colleagues hold, and their teaching and training experiences.

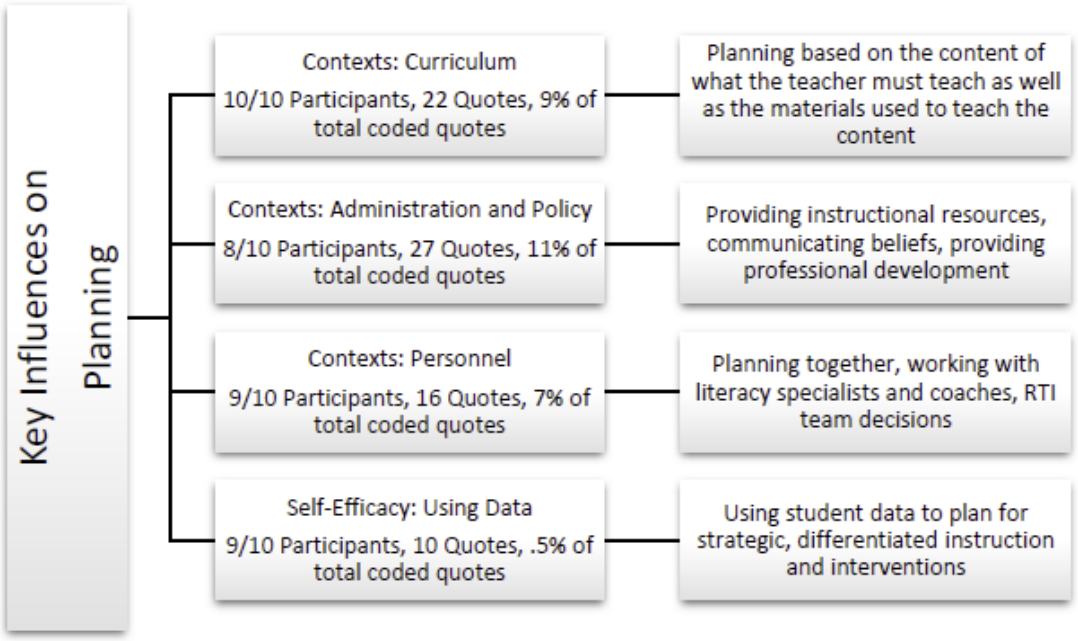
The fourth key influencer was self-efficacy: using data (*n* = 9; e.g., Data helps me group my children and helps me see who needs more intervention mostly – though that's data that I already know it's set for beginning of year [GE_13]). Self-efficacy in this study refers to the teacher's belief that he or she can help any child improve as a reader.

Figure 4.1 presents the key influences on teachers' planning decisions. For each

influence, the number of participants who were impacted by it is listed along with the number of quotes that were coded with it. To show the prevalence of each code, the percentage indicates the relative frequency of this code against the total number of coded quotes.

Figure 4.1

Key Influences on Planning for Instruction



Implementation

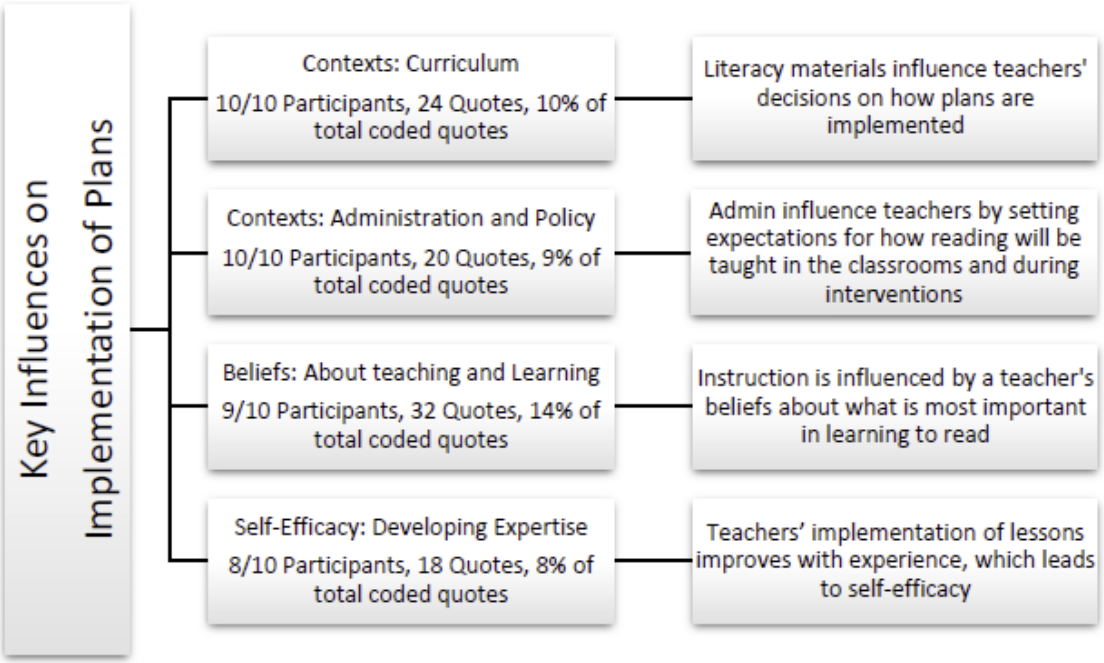
Implementation involves putting plans into action, which includes the teaching of whole-group literacy lessons, teaching of Tier I or -two small groups, how materials are used in these lessons, and classroom management. Four concepts were key influencers when implementing plans for instruction or intervention. Two of these concepts were contexts: curriculum (*n* = 10; e.g., I feel like we're kind of stuck in a little box because they want teachers to focus on certain things which I feel like sometimes isn't good, because there's gonna be things that aren't in there that the students are going to need to learn [GE_.5]) and

administration and policy (*n* = 10; e.g., So I was told, well, you need to work on comprehension. So I was just kind of using the guided readers that I had in my room and then coming up with questions [GE_2]). The third concept was beliefs about teaching and learning (*n* = 9; e.g., I think finding that way to motivate them is also effective in helping us to reach that same growth in the end of the year [GE_18]) and the fourth was self-efficacy: developing expertise (*n* = 8; e.g., I feel like reading has been somewhere that I really feel like I need to grow. I guess I'm just always I'm always thinking if I could be better. It should be better [GE_2.2]).

Figure 4.2 presents the key influences on teachers' implementation decisions. Again, for each influencer, the number of participants who were impacted by it is listed along with the number of quotes that were coded with it. The percentage indicates the percentage of quotes out of all coded quotes in the deductive coding.

Figure 4.2

Key Influences on Implementation of Plans



Assessment

Assessment includes both formative and summative assessments that are district-mandated as well as classroom assessments. Few participants discussed the influences on their assessment decisions, but two influencers were more prevalent than the others. Both of the key influencers were contexts. The most prevalent context was curriculum, although participants only spoke about the influence of curriculum on assessment decisions nine times (*n* = 7; e.g., *We use the [Fountas and Pinnell] guided reading. And then they even have reading records that go with them and everything to track progress [GE_13]). The other context was administration and policy* (*n* = 5; e.g., You know the expectation, but not requirement, is that we have running records for kids throughout the year [GE_8]).

Figure 4.3

Key Influences on Assessment

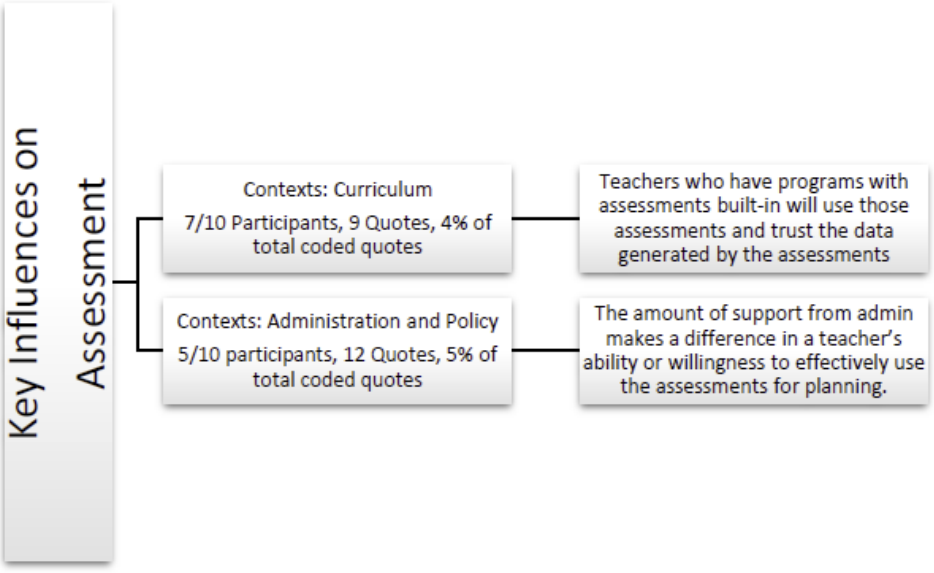


Figure 4.3 presents the key influencers on teachers' assessment decisions. The number of participants who were impacted by the is listed along with the number of quotes that were

coded with it. The percentage indicates the percentage of quotes out of all coded quotes in the deductive coding.

Key Influences on Teachers' Decision-Making: Findings from the Inductive Analysis

In my deductive analysis results, as described in the previous section, administration and curriculum were key influencers of teachers' planning, implementation, and assessment decisions. Less influential across all three areas of instruction were personnel, data, beliefs, and experience. The inductive analysis helped to determine the relationship between all of these concepts across planning, implementation, and assessment.

Theme 1: Administrators Influence Teachers' Decision-Making

The way administrators engage in decision-making for planning, implementing, and assessing readers affects teachers' decision-making. Nine of the participants discussed how their administrators affected their decision-making in 64 quotes (*n* = 29%), and in my deductive analysis, *contexts: administration and policy* was a key influence across all instructional decisions (I use the term *instructional decisions* to refer to planning, implementation, and assessment decisions throughout the findings and discussion). Administrators engage in literacy instruction by serving as instructional leaders. In this role, they provide instructional resources such as reading programs or additional literacy personnel, communicate beliefs about how students learn to read, and help teachers grow in their craft by providing coaching, one-on-one advising, or professional development (Jenkins, 2009).

School and district administrators influence teachers' decisions when implementing their plans by setting expectations for how reading will be taught in the classrooms.

Administrators may leave this decision to the teachers, but others control how reading is taught by purchasing materials, paying for professional development, hiring supplemental staff, and holding teachers accountable for how closely they follow the district curriculum. Teachers' decisions on how they will teach students to read cannot be separated from the influence of administrators and the policies they establish. Some of the influence that administrators have on teachers' decision-making when planning to meet the needs of their readers comes through decisions made with school or district RTI policies: who makes decisions about students, which students will qualify for RTI tiers two and three, and who will be responsible for the interventions.

The decision-making process is affected when administrators engage in decision-making by either supporting or constraining teachers' own decisions on how to work with readers, which readers will receive additional instruction, and what materials to use for teaching.

Examples of How Teachers' Decisions are Constrained by Administration

Arden's school district uses a "research-based" reading program that is scripted for teachers. She uses the script along with the district-mandated pacing guide to plan and implement instruction. Arden described how this practice limits her decisions on how to adjust instruction for her students.

> I feel like we're kind of stuck in a little box because they want teachers to focus on certain things which I feel like sometimes isn't good, because there's going to be things that aren't in there that the students are going to need to learn. And I feel kind of like trapped in my little like curriculum box. (GE_.5)

This feeling of "being stuck" with the decisions made by administration was also a concern of Audrey's. At Audrey's school, which had been labeled as "Improvement Required" for 2 years in

a row by the state's school rating system, the administrators use student benchmark data to divide students into smaller groups for RTI interventions (which they call WIN time). They do not ask teachers for their input on student groups except to ask if there are any obvious personality conflicts in the groups. When explaining how these administrative decisions make her feel, Audrey admitted the following:

> I hated WIN time. Out of all the students, none of the ones that I got for WIN time were my own students from either of my classes. I haven't built a rapport with those students….I don't actually know where their strengths are. I don't know what their weaknesses are. (GE_5)

In addition to constraining teachers' decisions on how to set up their reading groups, Audrey's district also decides which materials will be used for instruction in those RTI groups. This is another problem because it means that her instructional decision-making is not based on specific students' needs, but rather on the district's decisions on what students with reading difficulties required. She complained that,

> We were told we couldn't deviate from the material we were given. We were given the printouts every week and it would be basically drill and kill. We wouldn't even actually teach a lesson. It was just basically having them read the passage and answer the questions based on whatever TEKS were being pushed that week. (GE_5)

Lucy had a similar issue with administrators' decision-making constraining her decisions on how to conduct reading interventions. Lucy was assigned by her administrators to be an RTI interventionist for her grade level during her first year of teaching. She was not provided with materials for teaching her students having reading difficulties, so she found and purchased a program with her own funds that she felt was working well. However, her administrators asked her not to use that program. She explained,

> Their argument was, well, not all the other teachers have access to it because I personally bought the book online. So I was told, well, you need to work on

> comprehension. So I was just kind of using the guided readers that I had in my room and then coming up with questions. (GE_2)

During Lucy's second year as a reading interventionist, she received more guidance on free resources that she could use during her intervention lessons from the school RTI teacher. However, she confided that these "found" resources were not enough to support her teaching.

> To be honest, I didn't really know what I was doing. I was just trying…. So it was without resources or you know, a mentor, to kind of guide me in what to do. It was a little hard to isolate what strategies were working versus what weren't. (GE_2)

Examples of How Teachers' Decisions are Supported by Administration

Administrators make decisions that constrain teachers' ability to make decisions on what to teach, how to teach it, and how to assess students, but they can also engage in decision-making that supports teachers.

Amy's school district uses standards-based grading and teachers report student progress through placement on learning progressions. One of the progressions on which students are scored is *word families*, and her district decided to make this learning progression a point of focus for professional development. Amy explained how the district's grading policy and their decision to "push" teachers to improve their word family instruction had impacted her instructional decisions:

> So I think that just kind of pushed all of us to make sure [we were teaching word families in class]. Our district actually got really strong on word families in the last couple years. They were really trying to make sure that they could read all those families. (GE_12)

When describing her administrators' influence on her decision-making, Jessica stressed that "[t]he number one thing our principal always said is that you are professionals and you know your kids." Administrators in her school expect teachers to collect data, to implement

interventions when needed, and then to bring student concerns to the RTI committee.

> And so, when we come to them and say we have a child that is struggling and needs intervention, it's very much like, "Okay we believe you. You took these detailed notes. Let's just go." They take our word at it. They don't doubt us. (GE_4)

Jessica indicated that this expectation, along with the joint trust between administrators and teachers for decision-making, makes planning for instruction a collaborative effort.

> There's also definitely a culture of that we are professionals and if there are questions then we're going to ask. We're going to seek out those answers. Such a huge culture of collaboration because nobody is really scared to go to the principal or the vice principal and say, "I've been doing reading this way. Is that wrong or right?" Everyone feels like they can just say, "I'm struggling at this how can I get better at it?" It's very freeing. (GE_4)

Wendi is another teacher who attested to the support of the administrator's decision-making. In her school, the administration requires all teachers to use the workshop model for implementing reading, writing, and phonics instruction. They also emphasize topics around the workshop model when offering professional development opportunities. When asked if she believed that her administrator's decision to use the workshop model for literacy instruction was effective, she answered as follows:

> It's pretty effective if teachers are doing the workshop model, because the kids are getting that type of instruction starting in kindergarten. I mean, our entire school is vertically aligned with it, so you know, it can be effective. (GE_8)

Brett had taught for 17 years, but the last 10 years were in mathematics. Her administrator was moving her to English language arts the year after we met, and Brett expressed some concern about moving to literacy after a long absence. She was relieved that her district had adopted and mandated the use of an inclusive literacy program that had online elements for teacher planning, suggestions for lesson and intervention implementation, student assessments, and record-keeping options as well as texts and assignments for students.

She described how the program supported teacher planning and the implementation of reading instruction and reading interventions:

> And here what I did like about it. When I go to their Grade Level 3, it actually allowed me to go and find the TEKS. Oh yeah here's your interventions. Genre, guided reading. And then they actually lay out tasks for you. I can actually assign it and open it. You can do multiple things. You don't have to have your whole class doing the same thing. (GE_17)

Brett also explained how the program adoption affected her as a teacher who has not taught literacy in 10 years. In her opinion, it was preferable for the district to make decisions if the decisions removed some of the burden from the teachers.

> So [the new program is] beneficial. I'm happy I'm coming in at this time when they've actually done some collaboration and, you know, just told us "This is what I want you to use as a holistic tool." Versus teachers having to, you know, do more homework to find resources. That's pretty nice. [There are] videos and things for us to go look at online that show us how to do things. (GE_17)

Brett acknowledged that with this support from the program, "I think I'll be okay with this" (GE_17).

In summary, the way administrators engage in decision-making for planning, implementing, and assessing readers affects teachers' decision-making. In this study, teachers' decisions were both constrained and supported by administrators' decisions. This finding led directly to the second theme, which revealed how teachers' decisions based on their knowledge and beliefs are sometimes supplanted by other influences, including administrators' decisions as shown in Theme 1.

Theme 2: Teachers' Knowledge of Reading Instruction Influences Decision-Making

Teachers cultivate knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning through their experiences and training. They have knowledge and beliefs about what students need to

become proficient readers, but factors such as the curriculum, teaching experience, and the ability to manage the classroom sometimes supplant decisions based on their beliefs and knowledge. In my deductive analysis, I found that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning were a key influencer of teachers' implementation decisions. All 10 participants discussed how their knowledge and beliefs affected their practice in 66 quotes (*n* = 29%).

Decisions about planning, implementation of those plans, and assessment are all influenced by a teacher's beliefs about what is most crucial in learning to read. If teachers believe that students require explicit, systematic instruction in small groups, they will incorporate small groups during reading instructional time. If teachers believe that independent silent reading improves a child's reading ability, then they will make sure that independent silent reading is part of the reading block. The way teachers implement reading instructional time usually reflects their beliefs about teaching and learning. However, other factors may have more influence than a teacher's beliefs, such as the contextual influences also described in this study (e.g., curriculum and materials or administration and policies).

The participants in this study indicated that they possessed a level of knowledge about reading instructional strategies demonstrated by research to be effective for all readers, but especially for those who have difficulties with reading. Most participants shared that they use or have a desire to use small groups, provide additional time for readers having difficulties, and base instruction on student data. They believe that these are important, but beliefs do not always align with practice if there are other influences such as a lack of teaching experience or behavior issues. If a teacher believes that a specific activity or instructional method is essential for student learning, then he or she will prioritize that activity or method when making planning

and implementing decisions for instruction as well as when deciding how to assess student progress.

The Influence of Curriculum

As I demonstrated in my deductive data analysis, the curriculum is a key influencer of teachers' decision-making in all stages of instructional decisions, namely planning, implementation, and assessment. The curriculum sometimes takes precedence over teachers' beliefs and knowledge about students and teaching reading. Two teachers, Arden and Audrey, felt as though their reading programs force them to ignore specific student needs. Arden indicated this when she said, "I feel like we're kind of stuck in a little box [with our program] because they want teachers to focus on certain things which I feel like sometimes isn't good. There's going to be things that aren't in there that the students are going to need to learn" (GE_.5). Audrey echoed this sentiment about her reading intervention program: "I don't think it was very effective because you know some of these kids are so far behind, they really need to go back and actually be taught some of these skills, rather than just testing them over and over again. Which is pretty much what they were doing" (GE_5).

Other teachers decided to follow curricula even when they believe it is not appropriate for their students. Katie worried that her district curriculum is unattainable for some children:

> We have children who are 6 years old who will be expected to complete tasks that mentally would be more appropriate for a 7- or 8-year-old. You are setting them up for failure. So I think that really the question there is also the question of curriculum. Are we pushing them too fast? (GE_18)

When Lucy's grade level decided to adapt her district's curriculum framework for their specific students, based on their beliefs about what students need, this caused misalignment between

what was taught and how students were assessed by school district end-of-unit assessments, which are released to teachers right before the test date. Lucy explained how she believed this impacted the effectiveness of her teaching as follows:

> So at my school we use the framework when it was developmentally appropriate and it wasn't over their heads. My district likes to use texts that are about three grade levels ahead for whole group instruction. That just wasn't a viable option with our kids. So we would use texts that were more appropriate to what they could understand.... I wish that we had a [program] because a lot of it did not mesh well. I think we would have seen more growth if we had adopted a curriculum with assessments that were aligned to what was taught, with quizzes that were aligned with texts, that all mesh together. (GE_2)

Arden understood the need for differentiated small-group instruction. She also realized that some students having difficulty reading require more instructional time than others. She described how she organized instruction in her classroom for the two classes she taught – one with more gifted and talented children and the other with more students who had reading difficulties:

> I had a lot of students that were very below. And I would make sure that I was pulling multiple groups that day instead of like in my gifted and talented [GT] class where I would maybe pull like one group that day and spend a little bit longer trying to work on skills. Whereas my other class I really had to try to put like three or four groups, if possible, so maybe I wasn't spending a long time with them. (GE_.5)

However, Arden's use of differentiated reading groups was impacted by the district pacing guide and her status as a new teacher. Her district had a pacing guide that established expectations for how long each unit of study should last. They also pulled new teachers out of their classrooms for frequent professional development. Arden stated the following: "This last semester I was doing a lot of [professional development], so I got really far behind, and it was super stressful. Some days I would have to teach multiple unit lessons." Because of these

influences, she admitted that, “I was really just trying to get through what I had to teach everybody and I wasn’t really focusing on the small group stuff” (GE_.5).

Brett felt as though her school’s current literacy curriculum lacks an emphasis on teaching the “basics” of reading and writing, including phonics and grammar. “I think that’s our problem – we stopped teaching the rules. Teaching any rules in reading. You don’t even teach grammar anymore. How can you construct a sentence if you don’t know the parts of the sentence?” In her opinion, this has led teachers to believe that these “basics” are not important for developing readers. She worries that the kindergarten teachers do not teach reading. She said that she urges teachers to “please stop and teach them to read. If you do nothing else from kindergarten, teach them to read. Not just sing songs. I mean, it makes their days happy, but you know, you’re not learning” (GE_17).

The influence of experience. Arden’s beliefs about teaching reading, specifically her belief that instruction should be based on students’ needs, were affected by her lack of teaching experience. She explained how her inexperience impacted her ability to make decisions:

> There’s so many times where I’m teaching a lesson. And I could just tell that no one’s getting a thing. And I’m getting nothing back. And I’m just like, okay, what do I need to do? How do I explain this differently? It is very scripted; I do not read it word for word whatsoever. I just read the teaching point, the gist, and I get what I think out of it. And so I just feel like – I don't know, I just, I haven’t taught it that long. (GE_.5)

Rachel expressed some of the same concerns as Arden. She knew that students require differentiated instruction but she felt like her lack of experience affects her ability to make that happen. Rachel confided that this affects how she “rates” herself as a reading teacher:

> It’s like my higher kids I feel like I’ve always wanted to challenge them more. Then my ESL population: I always want to spend more time building those English foundational

> skills and really spending time on that and comprehension. I feel like a lot of my kiddos might be lower readers. So it's just I want more experience so I can give them more experience. So if I had to rate myself [as a reading teacher] I would say probably like five. (GE_2.2)

Even though she had more teaching experience than Arden and Rachel, Jessica's move from a charter school – where she had a small class with an educational assistant – to an urban public school – where she had twice as many students and no assistance in the classroom – affected her ability to use small, differentiated groups and literacy stations when implementing instruction. She explained how her lack of experience in this type of setting influenced her implementation as follows:

> I would really like to improve on really making sure that the instruction in the station work is where my high kids are not getting bored with the station and my low kids aren't zoning out because it's too hard. That's not something I feel like I've been able to implement as well in this scenario. The group that I have. Learning the new systems. Being overwhelmed. Like I said just relearning all of the strategies I had in my back pocket and applying it to this new group. (GE_4)

After 8 years of teaching and earning a master's degree, Wendi felt confident in her ability to teach reading. She knew that this confidence helped her to make informed decisions for her students who have difficulty reading, specifically when she decided to refer students to the RTI team. When asked how her decision-making would be different without the experience, she answered as follows:

> I would probably be that teacher, that's like, "Well, they're struggling. So here's their name." If I'm going to submit their name now with my training, it's because I've done everything I know how to do, and that's not working. Whereas other teachers that don't have this training or brand new teachers are so overwhelmed or like, "I don't know about this kid – you take them." (GE_8)

As Brett was in the process of making the transition from teaching mathematics for 10 years to teaching English language arts again, she expressed concern that she did not know the

standards (i.e., TEKS) in language arts, which would make planning difficult: “Sometimes it’s overwhelming because there are so many embedded [TEKS] – not like math.” As mentioned in a previous section, Brett knew that students need explicit instruction in reading, but her inexperience with teaching literacy and her lack of knowledge of the TEKS caused her to lack confidence.

The Influence of Classroom Management

Audrey was another teacher who wanted to use small-group instruction more often but felt constricted by her ability to manage the groups. She explained, “I don’t do well with small groups because I have trouble concentrating on one way, you know. Everything else going on there is distracting me, and I know it’s distracting students” (GE_5). This inability to handle small groups meant that she taught primarily whole group with students also having independent reading time. However, she knew that this was not meeting the needs of her students.

> I think that that working with small groups would be more beneficial to me. I wish I had the time to work with the students more one on one. The kids that are struggling because of, like, maybe it’s phonics problems – knowing the basics. I know I’ve got kids that are struggling there. (GE_5)

Lucy’s implementation and assessment of interventions are also influenced by classroom management. Her school has “extremely excessive and problematic” behaviors, which have impacted her ability to teach and to hold Tier II and -three interventions. She knew that interventions need to be consistent and conducted with fidelity and that students should be progress-monitored frequently, but the school-wide behavior issues prevent that from happening.

> So, more often than not, nobody was checking fidelity of whether or not RTI was being conducted. Tier III was getting cancelled. A lot. We did progress-monitor because the district had us progress-monitor three times a year. I wasn't progress-monitoring every week, and you know, nobody came to really show me how to do it or what to do or what specific skill set they wanted me to work on with these kids. (GE_2)

To summarize Theme 2, the participants in this study indicated that they possess knowledge about reading instructional strategies. These strategies have been proven to be effective for all readers, but especially for those students who have difficulties with reading. However, for some of the participants, decisions based on this knowledge were supplanted by influences such as the curriculum, experience, and classroom management. This finding helps to illustrate the importance of Theme 3, which discusses the influence of professional development on teachers' decision-making.

Theme 3: Professional Development Influences Teachers' Decision-Making

Professional development, including coaching, mentoring, and modeling from other teachers, administrators, or coaches, influences teachers' decision-making when planning, implementing those plans, and assessing students. In my deductive analysis, I found that self-efficacy: developing expertise was a key influencer of teachers' implementation decisions. Nine of the participants discussed their need for support or professional development in 34 quotes (n = 15%). These participants saw a need for professional development and appreciated it when they had it. Some participants also expressed a desire to become better at teaching reading as well as their need for support.

The Positive Impact of Professional Development

Arden's administration provided professional development in conferencing with

students when teachers requested help with this aspect of implementing reading instruction. She claimed that this professional development directly impacts her self-efficacy when conducting conferences:

> So there is a day that they got subs for us for a couple hours and they had us watch them do conferences with the students. And then we got to go back to our classrooms and practice conferencing with our students. I felt like that really helped me because they even gave us a little cheat sheet. Like what reading level they're at and how complex your questions need to be when you're asking them about what they've been reading. So that really helped me after doing that, and I felt like I became a rock star at my conferences. (GE_.5)

Amy attended a year-long course on balanced literacy offered by her school district that influenced her planning and implementation of reading instruction: "I still have a binder this fat from it [uses fingers to indicate approximately three inches]. We just went once a week and we studied kids and reported back and then the coach would instruct," she said. She refers to this binder when teaching and assessing students. She also admitted that she attended "any reading workshop that there is available." Even with all of the training in reading instruction, she still stated that, "I don't feel like I'm an expert. I feel like I've had a lot of success with kids" (GE_12).

Amy also described how her administration made teaching word families a focus of improvement school-wide through professional development opportunities and the positive impact that they had on her ability to plan for and implement instruction.

> I think overall, every time you went to a professional development for reading they were just giving you strategies…. So that was one of the learning progressions was word families. So I think that just kind of pushed all of us to make sure. So I just, I worked really hard on my team. We actually had professional development as a team of how we were going to hit those words families. And so we would come together, we made you know stations that were powerful. (GE_8)

Several teachers searched out means for providing their own professional development

when they felt underprepared to make instructional decisions to help readers. Wendi described her first year of teaching as "horrendous," and how lacking knowledge had impacted her instructional decisions and served as an impetus for starting her own professional learning:

> I was being told to do all of these things, but not told how to do those things – like guided reading and minilessons. And then like, "Just let the kids choose their books, but they have to be on level." I didn't know what any of that stuff meant. (GE_8)

Wendi took charge of her learning by finding professional resources. She explained how this self-study had impacted her teaching, especially when implementing reading groups:

> My reading instruction went up tremendously. And I started by learning how to do small groups better. I think I've only gotten stronger since then, especially since my masters. Now I don't worry about teaching reading anymore. Like, it's just the thing that I do now. (GE_8)

Arden was another teacher who took her professional development into her own hands. She watched professional development videos provided through her district's reading program, which show teachers teaching reading to children. She admitted, "I feel like that helped me a lot because I felt like it was a real student that I could watch and see how that teacher responded" (GE_.5).

Positive Impact of Professional Development through Coaching

When Amy was a novice teacher, her school hired a literacy coach and asked for teacher volunteers who desired coaching support. Amy remembered eagerly accepting help from the coach and explained how the coaching influenced her use of running records to assess student reading, which then impacted her ability to plan differentiated instruction.

> She really taught me about using running records. So what I would do is I had my running record binder and every day I would take a running record on someone. Then each month, I would just go over their running records and kind of see, okay this child

> really needs more comprehension conversations. This child needs -es at the end of words. This child needs this phonics. (GE_12)

Arden had many questions and concerns about teaching reading in her first semester of teaching. When asked how she developed her instructional decision-making in literacy, she answered,

> We are lucky that on our campus we have a coach that is right there with us and she's fantastic. I would go to her office a lot of times and ask her what I should do. And she would give me books or she would even research things for me. And she would send me links of videos. (GE_.5)

Even though Arden admitted she was not "100 percent confident" in making decisions to meet all of her readers' needs, she mentioned that, "I know who I can really rely on to help guide me if I am struggling" (GE_.5).

Rachel made a similar remark about her self-efficacy in teaching reading. She said, "I feel like reading has been somewhere that I really feel like I need to grow. I guess I'm always thinking like, if I could be better, I should be better. I need to learn more." She also "rated" herself as a five out of ten in teaching reading, but she explained how coaching or mentoring compensated for her lack of experience when making literacy instructional decisions:

> I feel like I'm really good at asking questions. So instead of just trying it and seeing if it will work, I like to ask. I'm really close with the reading interventionist…. And then I work next door to a master reading teacher. So it's like there's always somebody I can say, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing this. What do you think?" (GE_2.2)

Tiffany felt confident enough in her ability to teach reading that she requested that all of the students experiencing difficulties in reading be placed in her classroom. Yet, she still highlighted the benefit of having an instructional coach to support her reading instructional decisions, especially when a student was experiencing difficulties and she was unsure how to

help. She mentioned that her reading coach was “really, really good.” When asked why she felt this way, she replied as follows:

> She’s just very responsive. If I ask for something specific, she will go and search it out even if she’s not sure. She will come and offer to model lessons or come and offer to co-teach with you. I have video-recorded a student and then sent it to her and said, “Look, I’m having these issues with fluency. Here’s what it looks like,” and she’ll send me back her suggestions and stuff. (GE_13)

Wendi had also experienced this level of support from her literacy coach, who she described as “super helpful,” especially in implementing small group instruction.

> [Our literacy coach will] come in and show us small groups if we need it. She’ll watch us and give feedback. So it’s just very supportive to the small group structure. Which in my opinion, is the most effective Tier I instruction. (GE_8)

When Teachers are not Provided with Professional Development

In contrast to the experiences of teachers who have supportive literacy coaches and relevant professional development opportunities, this section sheds light on what might happen if teachers do not feel supported through professional development.

Lucy asked for help from her administration on planning for reading instruction. Her experience was less positive and also affected her confidence in meeting the needs of her students. Lucy admitted that, “[my first year] was very overwhelming. They paired me with a teacher who was in her second year of teaching. We didn’t have an academic coach. They only had an academic coach for K-2.” As an overwhelmed new teacher, Lucy reached out to the administration to help her with planning for instruction:

> And the assistant principal at the time, she was like, “Oh, well, I'll come help you plan because I taught fourth-grade reading for 10 years.” She would come and then rather than just explicitly lay out what and how she wanted us to teach she would just come and tell us “Well, you can just figure it out.” But as a first year teacher, I’m trying to

> figure it out. That's why I'm asking. I would love an explicit example, you know. Just something. (GE_2)

This idea of needing help but not receiving it continued throughout Lucy's interview, as we have seen in other sections of this chapter. Lucy's interview provided a picture of the impact on teachers' instructional decisions when they are not provided with professional development that meets their needs. When discussing her Tier II interventions, she admitted, "I wasn't progress-monitoring every week and nobody came to really show me how to do it, or what to do, or what specific skill set they wanted me to work on with these kids." When discussing her whole-class instruction and the impact of student behaviors on that instruction, she said the following:

> When students are throwing things at me and others, and then I'm trying to figure out how to serve these kids. To meet that gap when I'm just working out of what [I learned about in] my one college class about teaching reading. (GE_2)

Finally, when discussing meeting the individual needs of students in her Tier II reading intervention, Lucy said, "[i]t was hard for me to understand how and why they were struggling…. So it was without resources, or you know, a mentor, to kind of guide me and [tell me] what to do." Fortunately for Lucy, her school finally hired an academic coach in her second year of teaching, who she said was "amazing" and who she "learned a lot from" (GE_2).

Wendi had a similar experience to Lucy in her first year of teaching. As mentioned in a prior section of this chapter, Wendi described her first year of teaching as "horrendous" because she "was being told to do all of these things, but not told how to do those things – like guided reading and minilessons" (GE_8). She admitted that she had almost quit her job after that year, but fortunately she had turned to self-learning instead and had been a teacher for 8 years.

Audrey planned to provide her own learning opportunities as well to improve her proficiency in using small-group instruction during literacy implementation:

> I think if I were able to handle the small groups more effectively. And that's something I'm going to spend the summer working on is trying to develop a system for doing small groups that I'm comfortable doing. It may not necessarily be what is conventionally used with other teachers, but it's going to be something that I can handle. (GE_5)

To summarize Theme 3, professional development, including coaching, mentoring, and modeling, influenced the teachers' decision-making when planning, implementing those plans, and assessing students. Participants who received professional development that was applicable to their needs felt more efficacious when making literacy decisions. Other participants expressed requiring help when making decisions and that they would have benefitted from professional development, coaching, or mentoring, but that they had not received such help.

Theme 4: Teachers' Beliefs about Using Data for Instruction Influences Their Decision-Making

When data are used by teachers to plan for instruction, or with teacher input to place students in reading groups or interventions, those teachers believe in their ability to make literacy instructional decisions that meet the reading needs of their students. Eight participants discussed the influence of using data on making decisions in 27 quotes (*n* = 12%), and according to my deductive analysis, *self-efficacy: using data* was a key influencer of teachers' planning decisions. Effective literacy teachers use student data to plan for strategic instruction and interventions that meet the needs of every reader. However, participants used data for different types of instructional decisions, and not all data-driven decisions affected their literacy instruction.

The Influence of Data on Teachers' Decisions

Of the eight participants who described how they use data to inform their decisions when planning and implementing, four were clear about how this provided specific information on students' gaps in learning. This information produced a sense of efficacy in the teachers that they could make decisions about instruction that would impact their readers. Rachel used the district beginning-of-the-year assessment to identify specific skills for which students required explicit instruction:

> I can look further into [the district assessment] and it shows me what skills they're working at. I can see some of my kids are on blending. I had one kid still working on a kindergarten level. And I'm like, okay, I gotta pull you. So it's a good starting point. (GE_2.2)

Audrey also used assessments to determine students' strengths and needs, but she focused on using formative assessment. She specifically mentioned using observations and anecdotal notes called "aggressive monitoring," which she explained as "walking around the classroom really looking at each individual student and marking their progress, seeing what they're struggling with." She explained why she loved aggressive monitoring as follows:

> So, especially when it comes time to write up a present level of academic performance to work with developing an IEP or something, I have that data right there that I can work with. I enjoyed that. I like being organized, and to me it's a really good way to keep all that organized. (GE_5)

Amy and Tiffany had similar processes for using data to make planning decisions. Both teachers felt as though using data, specifically running records, both guided instructional decisions and organized how they monitored student learning progress. Amy explained her use of running records as follows:

> Every day I would take a running record on someone. Then each month, I would just go over their running records and see "Okay this child really needs more comprehension

> conversations. This child needs -es at the end of words. This child needs this phonics." So that was probably the best way that I was able to keep track of kids. (GE_12)

Tiffany claimed that "any good teacher knows where their kids are" (GE_13). In the following quote, she explained her use of running records for assessing students to make instructional decisions:

> I take one reading record per group every day. So I'll just home in on one child and check the reading. It helps me know, okay, I need to hit main idea or we are constantly missing the -ed functional ending, you know, stuff like that. It's just anecdotal records that help guide instruction. (GE_13)

When teachers use student data to plan for and implement instruction, they are demonstrating self-efficacy or the belief that their instruction can make an impact on students' identified needs. School-wide or grade-level use of data can also have a powerful effect on teacher self-efficacy. Katie's school assesses students at the beginning of the year to find specific areas for student growth and then work as a team to provide instruction:

> So I feel like we take that time earlier in the year to diagnose specifically what those gaps are and how to address them. Because it's happening multiple times a week and in multiple different environments throughout the school year, the teachers feel like with the RTI accommodations we can push everyone to move forward and to make the growth that's needed. (GE_18)

Jessica's administrators listen to the teachers' input on students and base their decisions around it. Jessica specified how this trust from administration – that teachers know what they are doing and have collected the data as "proof" – affects teacher self-efficacy by establishing that the teacher is able to make professional decisions:

> And so, when we come to them and say we have a child that is struggling and needs intervention, it's like, "Okay we believe you. You took these detailed notes. Let's just go." They take our word at it. They don't doubt us. (GE_4)

Issues with Using Data for Instructional Decisions

Jessica reflected on how the ability to use data, both testing data and observational data, when planning for instruction can improve a teacher's efficacy in meeting the needs of her students. However, she also made the point that teachers need to understand the meaning of the data:

> And so I was just thinking back to when I wasn't as confident with the testing. You have a kid who has terrible fluency but 100% comprehension. You may be unsure of how that meshes together and where to gauge your instruction. Because the paper says he is at this level but there's also that feeling that I don't feel like they are based on their everyday performance. (GE_4)

Wendi, like Jessica, believed that testing data could be used to plan for instruction and place students into tiered interventions, but that teachers should also keep their students' classroom performance in mind. Her school used the students' progress data and also looked at the "whole child" to determine who would benefit from tiered instruction. She said,

> So, the way they get qualified for Tier II is we look at a completion of all of their data and then home in on their progress, but my school is very much – it looks at the whole child and not just that numbers and data per se. So like you can have a kid who's struggling, but you don't think that they'll benefit from Tier II necessarily to start going through that process. (GE_8)

Wendi expressed a desire to analyze data and talk about children with her grade level, a decision-making practice in which she had participated at her previous school. She said that in her last position, "[e]very time we met, it was as a whole team. We would have data meetings. But this year we don't really compile data as grade levels, which is super interesting to me" (GE_8). In her current school, teachers turn data and other student information over to the administrators, and then the administrators make decisions about who receives Tier II and -

three interventions. She explained why working with data as a grade level was crucial to her and the grade-level team as follows:

> I think we would take more ownership for what kids are doing and struggling with if we were more involved. On my first campus we felt very strongly about helping these children because you hear about what they're doing and not doing and where they need support. And even though they're not in your classroom, it's like, "Oh, okay, yeah, let's help him." And now it's kind of like, "All right, well, they're struggling. So here's his name and I guess let me know if they may get into RTI or not." (GE_8)

Another possible issue with teachers' use of data was that the data they collect may not be used in a manner that impacts their decisions for instruction. For example, Wendi described how some teachers follow a program's guided reading book leveling system, moving children through the levels consecutively based on program-specific data without recognizing their needs first. She collects data on how students' comprehension improves over time and uses that data to make decisions about guided reading texts, which she described as follows:

> If a kid shows me that they're independent on that level, we're going to move to the next one. So my guided reading isn't the typical like – okay we finished reading all of the level G books. So now we're going to go to H. That's not how I operate. For me, my indicator that they're independent, is they give me three independent learning records at that level with stronger comprehension each time, so I look at the whole compilation of that to decide if we're going to try to go to the next one. (GE_8)

Some data decisions are more focused on changes in testing outcomes rather than student learning. Wendi's second-grade team does not have data meetings, but she explained that the third- through fifth-grade teams in her building do meet for data talks. They "look at the benchmark data: district wide, campus wide, and then similar school clusters because of STAAR. That's what they're trying to figure out is if they're going to pass or not" (GE_8).

Other teachers mentioned having data chats with their teammates or RTI teams to make decisions about student placement in differentiated groups, but then later claimed that

they do not know how to differentiate instruction. Lucy explained that every 9 weeks she had data chats with the RTI team to discuss student progress. Later in the interview, however, she admitted that teachers in her school were required to administer progress-monitoring assessments on a regular basis; however, she said, "I wasn't progress-monitoring every week and you know, nobody came to really show me how to do it, or what to do, or you know what specific skill set they wanted me to work on with these kids" (GE_2). This confusion over what to teach and how to know students were learning was mirrored again when she explained her decisions on what to teach during interventions. Lucy confessed that,

> It was hard for me to understand how and why they were struggling because I didn't have those hardships. So it was without resources or you know, a mentor, to kind of guide me and what to do. It was a little hard to isolate what strategies were working versus what weren't. (GE_2)

Another teacher who claimed to collect data to use as a "starting point" for instruction was Rachel. Later in her interview, she questioned her ability to differentiate for all readers. About her advanced readers she said, "I feel like they're meeting the expectation, but I feel like I've always wanted to challenge them more." Moreover, about her EL students she said, "I always want to spend more time building those English foundational skills and really spending time on that and comprehension. I feel like a lot of my kiddos might be lower readers" (GE_2.2). When asked how confident she was that she did a good job teaching reading, she responded, "[s]o if I had to rate myself, I would say probably like five" (GE_2.2).

This disconnect between knowing how to collect data and how to make data-driven instructional decisions was also echoed in Audrey's and Jessica's interviews. Audrey described how she uses formative assessments and "aggressive monitoring" in her classroom to collect data on student progress and knowledge. Then, she admitted that she did not use small groups

during reading instruction – only "a mixture of whole class and independent" (GE_5) because "I have tried and tried and tried, and part of it is my own problem. I don't do well with small groups because I have trouble concentrating on one way" (GE_5). When Jessica was asked how confident she was in using data to drive her instruction, she demonstrated a misunderstanding of data-driven instruction:

> Instruction-wise I'm pretty confident. [The reading fluency assessment kits] are what I used at my last school as well. I'm pretty used to knowing how they should be scoring for that level. As far as it driving instruction, I'm getting much better at gauging which books in my library or the school library I can recommend to parents and kids after that. "This will be a just-right book for you, this will engage you." I feel like I'm much more confident being able to do that for my students. (GE 4)

In summary, participants who shared that they collected data to determine students' strengths and needs did not always know how to use that data for instructional decisions. Some participants used the data to place students into tiered intervention groups or into small groups during their core instruction time, but they did not know how to make data-driven decisions. By contrast, other participants used the data to place students into groups and to provide differentiated instruction.

Theme 5: Collaboration Influences Teachers' Decision-Making.

Teachers support each other in planning for instruction and implementing those plans. Teachers who do not have this support mention wishing for more supportive personnel. Eight teachers mentioned the influence of collaboration with peers in 28 quotes, and collaboration (*contexts: personnel*) was found to be a key influencer of teachers' planning decisions in my inductive analysis.

Teachers draw on their colleagues' collective knowledge for planning, and for finding

solutions for implementing instruction with students who are not making adequate progress in reading. Some teachers plan with their grade-level teams, with reading or academic coaches, and with RTI teams. Other personnel who influence teachers' planning are special education teachers and reading interventionists. Teachers and specialists plan together for targeted interventions. They decide what to teach and who will be responsible for the different groups. Sometimes this happens through RTI meetings.

Collaborative Planning and Implementing Those Plans Supports Teachers

Several novice teachers in this study stated that they rely on the support of more experienced colleagues when they make instructional decisions. If their grade-level team is not supportive, they look for support from other staff. Arden was in this situation. She had accepted a teaching position at the school where she taught students in second grade because "in second grade, the whole entire grade level, everyone is super passionate about [teaching]. I loved it." However, her relationship with her third-grade team was different:

> Mostly, I didn't really feel that comfortable with talking to my team because a lot of them have been teaching for a really long time and they were kind of burned out. And they were just doing what they had to do. And so I felt like if I asked them, they're like, "No, don't worry about it." Whereas, I actually was like, well, I want to help. I want to make like a big impact. (GE_.5).

As a new teacher, Arden needed help with making decisions, so she found colleagues that were helpful. She said, "I still had my mentor teacher in second grade that I would go and talk to a lot." She also relied on her coach: "We have a coach that is right there with us, and she's fantastic. I would go to her office a lot of times and ask her what I should do" (GE_.5).

Rachel, another novice teacher like Arden, also relied on the help of a team to make planning decisions for her students. She admitted that she preferred to ask for help over "trying

it and seeing if it will work." When she needed help, she turned to those teachers who she considered experts:

> I'm really close with the reading interventionist. She's a reading specialist and a dyslexia interventionist. And then I work next door to a master reading teacher. So it's like there's always somebody I can say, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing this. What do you think?" (GE_2.2)

Jessica believed that asking for help and working together are professional behaviors. It seemed to be expected at her school that teachers will have difficulties and need to reach out for support for planning and implementing instruction. She said, "[i]f there are questions then we're going to ask. We're going to seek out those answers." She explained how this impacts her decision-making and makes her feel as follows:

> Such a huge culture of collaboration because nobody is really scared to go to the principal or the vice principal and say "I've been doing reading this way. Is that wrong or right?" Everyone feels like they can just say I'm struggling at this. How can I get better at it? It's very freeing. (GE_4)

Brett believed that one of the practices in her school that led to improved school-wide testing performance was collaboration within and between grade levels and teachers' support for each other. She said,

> One of the positives at our school – you can look up our data – one of the things that we do very well together is we collaborate and are very supportive. And that's horizontally and vertically. So we work well together. (GE_17)

Katie described her school's RTI process as the "best she's ever seen." Teachers meet twice a week to plan together and then every 3 weeks for a data meeting to "look at the kids and track their progress." These data meetings are intentional and reassured Katie that they are ensuring that every child is making progress. She explained how this impacted her decision-making as follows:

> I appreciate it a lot because I feel like a lot of the schools don't work with data until right at the end of the year and we're looking at remediation or we're looking at doing an evaluation for SPED. And in this case they've been very proactive in, "Let's see. Okay this student is improving by leaps and bounds so we're going to pull back a little bit on her. Do we have another student that is not improving that would benefit from more time?" And it was very well done. Very intentional. I feel like we were able to identify students who were really struggling earlier. Because they couldn't just slide. They couldn't just disappear. (GE_18)

Amy and her grade-level team collaborate to share the burden of planning and implementing interventions for the entire grade level. They had realized that the time period between students entering the building in the morning until the first bell rings is time that can be used to meet some literacy needs. The teachers use data to divide the children according to their strengths and needs and then host literacy-focused activities in each classroom. She said,

> So it was all first-grade teachers breaking up their kids, finding out where they were, you know. That was cool. And we did that according to progressions. So I think rhyming was the first step, and then I think it was segmenting and blending word families. So yeah, very – Don't leave a kid behind you. I mean we really are a school that very much wants every child successful. (GE_12)

RTI Processes Support Collaborative Decision-Making

RTI teams in which teachers, specialists, and administrators work together to plan for intervention groups can be crucial support systems for teachers. Lucy explained the process that her school uses for placing students in RTI intervention groups. This process is similar to those of other participants' schools. Even though Lucy did not express how this process helped her, she drew a picture of how an RTI team influences teacher decision-making and provides support for teachers in making planning decisions:

> We had to have intervention for a 9-week period. And so after those 9 weeks we would come and have data chats where, after screening, we would look and see how the number shifted – who grew, who didn't. What the needs might be, whether it be, you know, fluency, or is it comprehension? What is the struggle? We'd have those data

> chats and we'd look at all of these different factors and then we would reorganize our tiered groups. (GE_2)

Rachel appreciated the support of her RTI team when she did not understand a student's reading difficulties. She explained, "[i]t gives me more ideas and it gives me more eyes on the kid. I guess because I'm still like, I don't know – this [the student's difficulties] kind of seems fishy. Rachel described the process her RTI team uses to support teachers in making instructional decisions for students who are not making progress in the core classroom as follows:

> We would start working as a grade level and a team saying, "What do you think would be a good solution?" and "Have you tried this?" So like one of my kids was on my radar this year. She was a low reader. So I said, "I think this could be somebody we should consider for dyslexia intervention." I gave them her data and then they're like, "Well, have you tried the new Neuhaus program?" "No, let me try that for her." So I tried that intervention for 6 weeks. Later I came back. I said, "That didn't work for her." "Then, have you tried x, y, and z?" Oh, well, let me try that or yeah I have tried that. It's kind of just like a checkpoint process. (GE_2.2)

Rachel felt as though this RTI process is beneficial beyond helping whichever child was the subject of the meeting. She stated that she applies what she learns in these meetings to helping other children in her class who do not have "documented problems."

> I have two other kiddos that would probably benefit from a similar intervention. They're not identified with anything like that but I thought it would be a good fit for them. So I applied that to them and it works for them too, which is really cool. I find that my school is very like – not one thing is going to work for everybody. So you got to find out what works for all your kids. So I feel like I really have the power to intervene in that way, even if it's not a documented problem. (GE_2.2)

As mentioned previously, Wendi expressed a desire to have collaborative discussions about students with her colleagues. She described what these discussions looked like in her previous school and how they supported teacher decisions on how to help students having difficulty reading as follows:

> We were involved in making the groups and who goes in and we were all in that meeting together like the whole team of teachers and the academic support are all in the same meeting talking about these kids, and we would negotiate with each other. Well, this is what this kid is doing. And this is why I think they need to go here. Okay, well, I'll take this kid to Tier II and you can put him back into your Tier III instead. (GE_8)

Wendi believed that these types of collaborative discussions led to more self-efficacy for teachers. She explained the impact of having these discussions as follows:

> I think we would take more ownership for what kids are doing and struggling with if we were more involved. On my first campus we felt very strongly about helping these children because you hear about what they're doing and not doing and where they need support. (GE_8)

To summarize Theme 5, participants felt supported when they were able to collaborate on making instructional decisions such as what to teach and how to help students having difficulty reading. Participants whose schools used RTI teams for collaborative decision-making also felt supported in making decisions on student placement and intervention decisions. Participants who do not have this support mentioned wishing for more supportive conversations with colleagues.

Participant Vignettes: Putting it all Together

Decision-making is complex, and the explanation of the five themes I presented in this chapter demonstrate that even though these participants are influenced by similar factors, they are each influenced differently and to different degrees. The following vignettes are provided as a way to view how each individual experiences these key influences as described in my inductive and deductive analyses. The vignettes are organized by themes, but in some instances there are overlapping themes or the themes are placed out of numerical order to present the information in a logical manner. The five themes are

1. Administrators influence teachers' decision-making
2. Teachers' knowledge of reading instruction influences decision-making
3. Professional development influences teachers' decision-making
4. Teachers' beliefs about using data for instruction influences teachers' decision-making
5. Collaboration influences teachers' decision-making

Arden

Theme 1: Administration

Arden, a teacher who started in January and taught just 1 semester of English language arts and social studies, had a district-required pacing guide for instruction that told teachers which lessons should be taught on which days. The units had about two weeks between them for a cushion in case teachers needed extra time to complete the units. New teachers in this district were pulled out of class multiple times a month for professional development. This led to Arden falling behind on the pacing guides and sometimes needing to teach multiple lessons in a day to keep up.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction

Arden believed that her curriculum and the requirement to follow it regardless of her students' needs caused her to feel "trapped in [her] little curriculum box." She believed that the curriculum was good for creating passionate readers and writers, but she was not sure that it guided them to proficient reading and writing. Arden admitted that teaching reading was "super stressful" because of the demand of the pacing guide and the district's policy requiring all teachers to follow the pacing guide regardless of the teacher's beliefs about the

effectiveness of the curriculum. Even though her experience teaching reading was stressful, Arden felt like her administration was very supportive of her. She said, “I'm super excited. My principal is super supportive of me and really likes me, and so I'm super happy” (GE_.5 Int).

Arden was provided with a scripted reading program to follow, and she admitted that she could tell her students “just weren’t getting it” because it was not reactive to students’ needs like a teacher could be with a less structured program or if she had more experience teaching. She said that she did not follow the program word-for-word after a couple months’ experience because she eventually became more confident in how to present the information to students to help them understand the concepts.

Theme 3: Professional Development

Arden’s coach helped her in multiple ways. She provided professional development books for her to read, she researched for Arden, and she sent her video links for lessons to watch or other resources to help with whatever Arden’s needs were at that time. Arden said that her coach was “fantastic.”

Theme 4: Using Data

Because Arden had only been teaching for 1 semester, and a large part of that semester was online due to COVID-19, she only participated in one or two data meetings with her administrator and colleagues. However, Arden and her co-teacher, who taught math and science, met weekly to discuss their shared students and to place them in tutoring groups held before the school day. Arden said that at first she had no idea what to do during the tutorials, but then she found and used small group teaching points in their reading program that she had

not used for her classroom instruction.

Theme 5: Collaboration

Arden's grade-level team was not helpful when she had questions about students in her classroom, which she attributed to teacher "burn-out." She wanted to be an effective teacher, so she spent time collaborating with other staff members who were helpful, specifically her literacy coach and her student teaching mentor teacher in second grade. Arden admitted she was not "100 percent confident" in making decisions to meet all of her readers' needs. However, she said, "I know who I can really rely on to help guide me if I am struggling" (GE_.5).

Lucy

Theme 1: Administration

Lucy, a teacher with 2 years' experience, was given the role of RTI teacher for her grade level during her first year of teaching. When asked if she volunteered, she said no. She did not understand why she was given this "opportunity." To make matters worse, the school did not have a reading program for her to use, and when she purchased a program with her personal funds that she felt was working, the administration told her that she could not use it because other teachers did not have access to it. Instead they told her to just work on comprehension. For her interventions, Lucy turned to online programs that were free and accessible for students. She chose resources based on what the children were assessed on – words per minute – and other skills that she knew were important, like sight words and compound words.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction

The district Lucy worked in provided a curriculum framework to guide instruction and to

suggest performance tasks. The framework included texts to use with the students that Lucy said were “three grade levels ahead for whole group instruction” (GE_2). She argued that a purchased program would have been more helpful for her because the resources put together by the curriculum framework authors did not always make sense, or she felt like they were not age-appropriate. One example she gave was the framework encouraged teachers to use the poem “Where the Sidewalk Ends” by Shel Silverstein (1974) in a module about perseverance. She did not see how this poem was appropriate for this theme in third grade.

Lucy’s school had “extremely excessive and problematic” behaviors. Dealing with these behaviors put a strain on administration, and she said they did not check in with teachers very often. She also said that Tier III was cancelled “a lot.” She thought that her administrators really did not care what she was doing in class as long as she was maintaining control of classroom behaviors. She said, “To be honest, I don't think they really cared what I did. If I had them sit on a tablet and play, you know, Go Fish, I don't think they would have cared” (GE_2).

Theme 3: Professional Development

Lucy admitted that she often did not know how to help her below-proficient readers. She said that her mother used a popular home phonics program to teach her to read at the age of four, so she never struggled with reading in school and was always ahead of her grade-level peers. This, along with the lack of a mentor and resources, made it hard to understand how and why her own students were struggling. After her first year, the school hired an academic coach for the upper grades. Lucy remarked that the opportunity to have a coach was “amazing” because she learned a lot from him.

Theme 4: Using Data and Theme 5: Collaboration

Lucy's grade-level and administrators would meet every 9 weeks to have data chats. They used district screening data to place students into tiered intervention groups. Once the children were in the groups, Lucy was uncertain which instructional strategies were working for her students and which were not. She felt like she was at a disadvantage when trying to fill in the gaps for these children. She was relying on only one semester course on teaching reading in college. She described this first year teaching as "very emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting."

Rachel

Theme 1: Administration

Rachel, another teacher with 2 years of experience, said that her school gave teachers the freedom to choose how to teach reading and what resources they used. Because of this, Rachel said that she felt like there was an "expectation of greatness" in her school (GE_2.2), but she really did not know what other teachers were doing in their classrooms since everyone had their own styles of teaching and beliefs. She never knew what was happening in other grade levels: what materials they were using or what instructional practices they were using.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction and Theme 4: Using Data

Rachel was not confident in her ability to teach reading. She said, "I guess I'm just always thinking like, if I could be better, it should be better. I need to learn more." (GE_2.2). She explained how her school used student assessment data to determine students'

reading needs, but then she struggled with knowing how to plan for differentiated small groups.

Theme 3: Professional Development

Rachel admitted that in her first year she had no idea what she was doing. She even said, “I'm really sorry for those kids. I was doing great just showing up.” However, after working with her team and the reading specialists at her school, the current year went much better. She still had areas where she wanted to grow as a literacy teacher. “I felt like I wanted to grow a little bit more in guided reading for sure because that's like my nemesis. But like small group lessons, I felt like I was I was definitely stronger by the end of this year” (GE_2.2).

Theme 5: Collaboration

Rachel felt like one of her strengths was the willingness to ask questions when she was unsure what to do for her students. Rachel preferred to ask for advice rather than just try something and wait to see if it was a successful instructional activity or intervention. She was really close with the reading interventionist and dyslexia interventionist. She also taught next door to a master reading teacher. She and her grade-level team planned together every day during their thirty-minute lunch break.

Jessica

Theme 1: Administration

Jessica, a teacher with 4 years of experience, had recently moved from a small Montessori school to an urban public school. She said that her school culture normalized teachers as learners. Teachers felt free to ask for help when they needed it or to ask

administrators to evaluate their teaching. “Everyone feels like they can just say ‘I'm struggling at this. How can I get better at it?’ It's very freeing” (GE_4).

Administrators at Jessica’s school were the intervention team. Her school did not have common intervention blocks, and teachers were given control of how their classroom instruction and intervention times were handled. “We do have a lot of freedom and how we build our schedules, and so it is very much how we want to roll it into our day” (GE_4). The administrators told the teachers that they trusted them as professionals to make the best decisions for their students. When teachers went to the administration with student concerns, the administrators started the process for placing children in Tier III interventions.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction and Theme 3: Professional Development

Jessica divided her class in half during literacy so that half were participating in literacy centers and the other half were working either in small groups or reading independently. She did this so that she could provide interventions for some of her students three times a week while the students who were “more gifted and talented or above-level” had book clubs. She was not certain the literacy centers met the needs of all her students and sometimes became “overwhelmed” with the move to a larger class with many reading levels. Her school purchased multiple programs for reading interventions, but the teachers received minimal professional development on how to use them, so Jessica did not use the purchased programs.

Theme 4: Using Data

Jessica felt like she was confident on using data to drive her instruction. She gave examples of data-driven decisions: she can place students in appropriate leveled readers for her

reading program and is able to suggest “just-right” books for her students at the library.

Theme 5: Collaboration

Jessica collaborated closely with her grade-level team. They planned together so that their classroom instruction looked similar. They also discussed their students to make sure each student was receiving the instruction needed in the classroom, even if the child was being pulled out by a specialist. She said, “Everyone at my school is willing to listen to your concerns and offer help and suggestions on how to address any problems you might be having. I have drawn upon the collective knowledge of my colleagues this year quite a bit” (GE_4 Int).

Audrey

Theme 1: Administration

Audrey, a teacher with 5 years of experience, was certified to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) students, so she was given a larger than average (for the grade-level) intervention group of ESL students. Student placement in intervention groups was determined by administration. The teachers gave student names and data to the administrators and then the administrators placed the children into groups. Audrey said that the only input taken from the teachers on these groupings was if any of the children placed together would have behavior conflicts. Audrey’s group last year had none of her homeroom students. This was difficult for Audrey because she felt she would be more impactful with students with whom she had a relationship.

Audrey mentioned that she believed independent reading was as beneficial or more beneficial than a specialized curriculum for developing readers. However, her district provided

scripted materials for teaching intervention groups each week, and teachers were expected to follow the scripts regardless of their students' needs or their own beliefs about teaching reading. The lessons consisted of reading passages and questions to answer for each passage.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction

Audrey became frustrated with the mandated curriculum. She felt like it was teaching testing strategies but not meeting the needs of the students by addressing reading skills her students were lacking. "We wouldn't actually teach a lesson. It was just basically having them read the [leveled] passage and answer the questions based on whatever TEKS were being pushed that week." Audrey admitted that she hated their intervention block time (GE_5).

Theme 4: Using Data

Audrey felt confident about one thing - keeping anecdotal notes on her students' progress. This made her happy and she seemed to feel really good about this part of her instruction. Using the anecdotal notes gave her a sense of ownership over her students' progress. However, she still taught literacy primarily whole group because her students had too many behaviors to try small groups. She was unable to maintain concentration when working with a small group.

Theme 3: Professional Development

Audrey wanted to improve her literacy instruction, but she was unsure how to do so. She knew that small groups were important for meeting the needs of her students, so she had plans to complete some self-learning over the summer about implementing small groups.

Wendi

Theme 1: Administration

Wendi had 8 years of teaching experience. Her administration was the RTI team on her campus. Teachers put their student data into an online system and then the assistant principals decided which children received tiered intervention supports. These decision-making meetings were attended by the academic support teachers but not the classroom teachers. The classroom teachers were asked few questions and then found out later from the RTI team which students would receive Tier II or -three instruction. Wendi believed that teachers would take more ownership for what children were doing and struggling with if they were more involved in this decision-making.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction

Wendi had a master's degree in reading, a reading specialist certificate , and a dyslexia practitioner certificate. She believed that if she were a newer teacher and did not have all of these trainings, she would be submitting names to the RTI committee because she was at a loss on how to help the children who were not proficient readers. The names would represent both her own personal struggles as a teacher and her students' struggles with reading. With her training, she felt confident that the names she turned over to the RTI committee were students who had received the best instruction and interventions possible in the classroom, and at that point they needed instruction she could not provide in the classroom.

Theme 3: Professional Development

Wendi remembered that in her first year of teaching she was asked to use several

instructional methods that she did not understand such as guided reading, small groups, or using leveled texts. She described the year as “horrendous” and nearly quit after that first year. Instead of quitting, she spent the summer teaching herself through books such as those by Jennifer Serravallo. She focused on using small groups, and the next year she said that her reading instruction improved “tremendously.” Later she earned a master’s degree in literacy and now reading is “just the thing [she does] now” (GE_8).

Wendi used a workshop model in her classroom for literacy. Using a workshop model was an expectation for teachers starting in kindergarten at her school. She believed that Tier I instruction was effective in her school if teachers followed the workshop model. Wendi’s administrators emphasized small group instruction. Because of this emphasis, the teachers received “a lot” of professional development on implementing small groups.

Theme 4: Using Data and Theme 5: Collaboration

Wendi expressed a desire to examine data with her team. She had that experience in a previous Title I school. Beyond knowing what other teachers’ students are doing, Wendi also felt like this collaboration strengthened the community of teachers. When teachers shared about their students’ needs, other teachers could help support that teacher and her students.

Amy

Theme 1: Administration

When Amy, a teacher with 12 years of experience, planned for instruction, she considered her students’ needs first. In Amy’s district, the curriculum was a progression of skills that students were tested on each grading period. Each aspect of literacy had a progression of

skills that had to be introduced according to the schedule. She mentioned that she taught based on students' needs and not necessarily based on the progression. Amy worked with students in small, homogeneous reading groups. She emphasized personal growth goals and celebrated children's achievements no matter how small. "We're just worried about what we're doing for ourselves because we all have different skills and talents"(GE_12). Amy believed that the learning progressions pushed teachers to make sure each child was making progress within each standard.

Theme 3: Professional Development

In Amy's first year at her current school district, the school hired a literacy coach. This coach taught her how to conduct running record assessments and how to use the resulting data. Now, Amy keeps a binder of running records and monthly reports. She used these records to plan for her instruction, and this empowered her teaching. She still did not feel like an "expert" reading teacher even though she had successfully helped many children become proficient readers. There are always a few students at the end of the year who do not reach proficiency even though she used all of her resources, including asking for help from coaches and the dyslexia teacher.

Theme 4: Using Data and Theme 5: Collaboration

Amy's first-grade team decided to use the 10 minutes before school, when children were allowed into the building but had to wait in the hallway, for reading time. The teachers split the children into groups and each classroom had activities that addressed skills like rhyming and segmenting words. She said that her school really believed in the motto, "don't

leave a kid behind." They wanted every child to be successful, and teachers tried to find creative ways to make that happen. Amy's experience included multiple professional development opportunities that impacted her literacy instruction. She remembered one professional development opportunity where she learned about teaching word families. The teachers at this training were able to make word family stations together that were "powerful."

Tiffany

Theme 1: Administration

Tiffany had 13 years of teaching experience. She claimed that she had "extensive reading training," which she then explained as training and coaching she received when a former school district adopted a new reading program. Because of her training, she requested that the readers who were "stragglers" be placed in her classroom. None of her students were proficient in reading at the beginning of the school year. Her district had a reading program that she really liked, and the school had a common intervention block during which Tier III students were taken out of the classroom for interventions by specialists. During this intervention time Tiffany was able to meet with the higher readers in her class, enabling her to meet with every small group every day.

Theme 4: Using Data

Tiffany used running records and other program-based assessments to inform her instruction. She completed one running record per group each day. This data allowed her to provide differentiated instruction for each of her reading groups, and she ended the year with

about half of her students meeting the proficiency standards on the district reading assessment.

Theme 3: Professional Development

Tiffany believed that teachers need to be life-long learners, constantly looking for ways to improve their teaching skills. Tiffany's school gave teachers the opportunity to go into other classrooms to watch their colleagues teach. They also had a reading coach who modeled lessons and helped teachers plan. Tiffany said that her literacy coach was very responsive to the teachers' needs. When teachers asked her questions, she would search out the answers. The coach also modeled lessons and offered to co-teach if requested by teachers. Tiffany even video-recorded a student who had difficulty with fluent reading and asked the reading coach for suggestions for working with the student. She said that her reading coach was "really, really good." Tiffany believed that coaching is part of a teacher's responsibility to grow as a teacher by working on their areas of weakness.

Brett

Theme 1: Administration

Brett had been teaching for 17 years, though she had spent the last 10 years teaching only mathematics. Her principal asked her to move to language arts the following year and she was slightly anxious about this change even though she had taught language arts in the past. The school district just adopted a new literacy program. Brett was very excited about having a resource that gives teachers materials and lessons to follow. This new program had an online

portal where teachers could establish accounts for each student and then assign independent work based on their literacy needs.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction

Brett saw this online program as opening up the day for more small group work time while allowing for individualized instruction without having to sit with each student to explain their tasks. She said that it would help her since she would not "have to think too hard" (GE_17), which calmed her fears about moving from teaching math the last few years to teaching literacy.

Theme 3: Professional Development

Administrators at Brett's school determined areas where students were "deficient" school-wide. Then required staff meetings were held every week where teachers received training on how to meet these needs. The administrators purchased computerized programs to address those deficiencies. She said that they had purchased so many of these programs that there was no consistency in what happened in classrooms. Teachers were required to use the programs, which Brett described as causing segmented instruction because "everybody wants to have reports to say they spent 30 minutes [on the programs] when they are teaching."

Theme 4: Using Data

Brett's school used an electronic system of collecting data on each child. Teachers were required to update the system whenever they assessed their students on standards, and the system alerted teachers to which children needed progress-monitoring and how often.

Theme 5: Collaboration

Brett claimed that a particular strength of her school was vertical and horizontal collaboration and support. She believed that this collaboration influenced their test scores because teachers worked together across grade levels and content areas. Even though Brett had been teaching mathematics for a decade, she was passionate about building a strong foundational knowledge in reading. She said that she had discussions with other teachers about the need to become more strategic about teaching phonics and to explicitly teach fluency and comprehension strategies. She also shared a story about helping a child learn to read who was having trouble in school. She set up a reading program for him on the computer and had him working on that while she taught mathematics to the rest of the class. Brett said the boy learned to read and became excited to come to school.

Katie

Theme 1: Administration

Katie had been teaching for 18 years. When Katie planned for instruction in literacy, she kept the district's curriculum pacing in mind but focused more on the needs of the students. She worried that pacing guides and standards required more from students than what was developmentally possible or even necessary. She preferred to think more realistically about what her students needed to reach proficiency.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Reading Instruction

According to Katie, reading develops with maturity. Students in kindergarten and first grade are often not ready to read when they start school, but as they mature and learn more

developmentally-appropriate skills, they mature as readers. Katie believed that maturity is often the cause of reading difficulties in children, but children in poverty have a higher chance of struggling to read because of cultural reasons.

Theme 4: Using Data

She met with her grade-level team twice a week to talk about students and to plan. They looked for trends with specific students and then decided if any students needed to be referred to the RTI team. The teachers also worked together to design learning activities for their literacy block. Each teacher felt confident teaching specific skills, so the students went to different teachers throughout the week.

Theme 5: Collaboration

If the teachers noticed that a student was not making progress, the three-person administrative team pulled the child and administered a fluency screener. If the results were average, the teacher could still request help for that child. Her school recently hired reading specialist aides who helped with the interventions. Most of these aides were retired teachers.

Katie's school asked teachers to have grade-level data meetings every three weeks to look at individual student data and track their progress. Data were used to place students in grade-level intervention groups that were constantly changing based on students' needs. The teachers decided who would teach each group and what content would be covered, based on the data and their own teaching strengths. This system of constant data analysis helped identify students early in the year who needed intensive interventions to meet end-of-year goals.

Summary

These vignettes were included in this paper to emphasize that teacher decision-making is largely dependent on many factors and it would be difficult (or even impossible) to conclude that teachers are influenced by factors in the same ways. When teachers are in similar school settings and have similar years of experience, their processes for making decisions and the factors that influence those decisions are still individually distinct because they are individuals with different life experiences who are working with other individuals in unique situations. I presented five themes in Chapter 4 that were fairly consistent amongst my participants, but even within these themes explaining key influences on teachers' decisions, participants were affected in different ways. Chapter 5 presents my discussion of these themes and their influence on participants.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Decision-making is complex because so many influences impact it (Schwille et al., 1980). The purpose of this study was to identify influences on kindergarten through sixth-grade literacy teachers' decisions when planning for instruction, implementing those instructional plans, and assessing readers, especially for students having difficulty learning to read. The decision to make this the focus of my study was inspired by my experiences as an elementary general education teacher and reading interventionist.

Providing high-quality instruction for all students is the first step in preventing reading difficulties (Al Otaiba et al., 2015; Fuchs et al., 2014; Torgesen, 2002), and therefore, high-quality instruction should be the primary goal of the general education teacher. Planning for high-quality reading instruction includes understanding students' strengths and areas for growth, understanding the curriculum and the programs used within it, and understanding how to set up the classroom to meet the needs of every child.

In the early years of my career, I knew very little about teaching reading, and when students arrived in my upper-elementary classroom unable to read grade-level texts, I struggled with knowing how to help them. As I gained experience and knowledge, I was able to make more informed instructional decisions for my students, leading to an increased ability to meet the needs of my students. My decisions, however, were always based on the school context in which I was working. I learned how to teach reading through district-adopted reading programs and professional development. I also learned about assessing students and using data to drive

my instruction through professional development and working with more experienced colleagues.

This descriptive qualitative study surveyed 36 teachers and interviewed 12 elementary teachers to learn more about the influences on their planning, implementation of those plans, and assessment of readers. In this chapter, I discuss the findings of this qualitative study. Following a discussion of the findings, I discuss the study's implications for administrators who serve as literacy leaders in their school communities and teacher educators who are striving to prepare future literacy teachers. I then propose ideas for extended research with regard to this study.

Discussion of the Findings

This study was guided by the following research question: What influences kindergarten through sixth-grade literacy teachers' instructional decisions when planning, implementing, and assessing students, especially students who are experiencing reading difficulties? The data indicated that there were five major themes that summarize the influences on teacher decision-making when teaching reading:

1. Administrators influence teachers' decision-making.
2. Teachers' knowledge of reading instruction influences decision-making.
3. Professional development influences teachers' decision-making.
4. Teachers' beliefs about using data for instruction influence their decision-making.
5. Collaboration influences teachers' decision-making.

Theme 1: Administrators Influence Teachers' Decision-Making

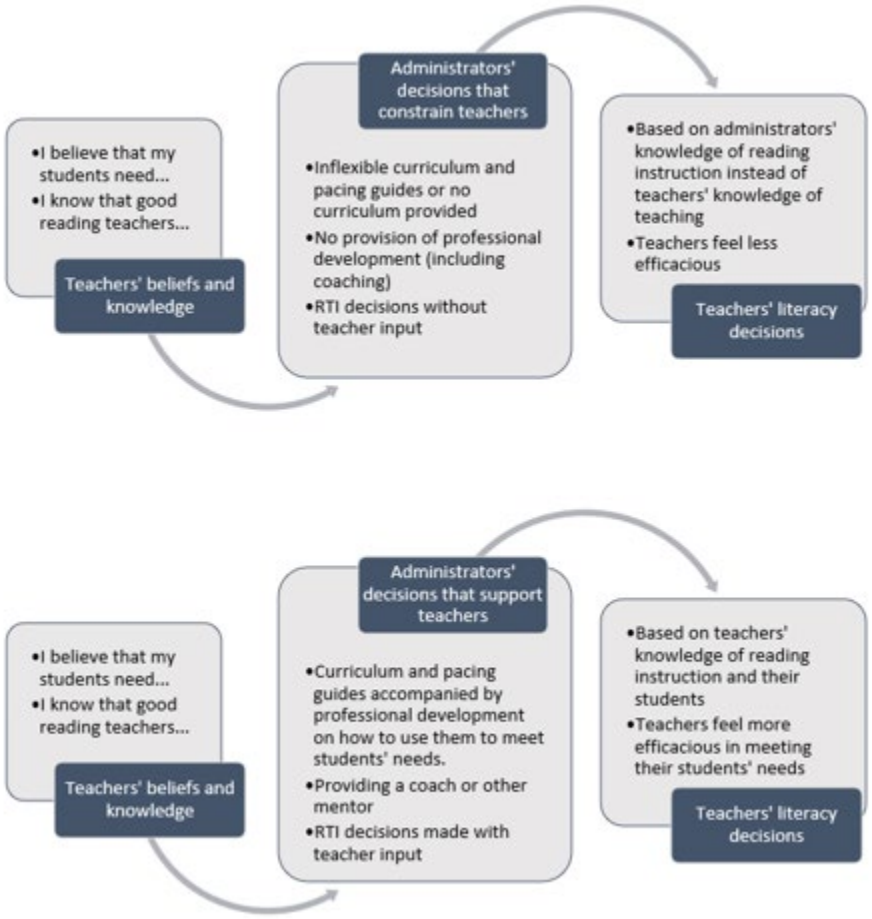
The decision-making process is affected when administrators engage in decision-making by either supporting or constraining teachers' own decisions on how to work with readers, especially readers who have experienced difficulty in learning to read. Administrators serve as mentors for teachers, providing teachers with support when planning for and implementing instruction. They also determine which curriculum will be used for planning and implementing, and how students will be assessed. Additionally, they determine how RTI processes are conducted in the school or school district. Some administrators invite teachers to participate in these decisions, whereas others do not.

The findings of this study indicate that administrators are a key influence on teacher decisions in planning, implementing, and assessing readers. However, the findings also suggest that when administrators constrain teachers' ability to make decisions, their self-efficacy is affected. Self-efficacy, according to Ruppar et al. (2015), is a core concept (i.e., influence) in making literacy decisions, and therefore, this finding is critical to consider when thinking about the influence of administrators. Prior studies have drawn varied conclusions on the effect of administrative leadership on teacher self-efficacy when making teaching decisions (e.g. Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Lee et al., 1991; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) found that teacher self-efficacy was not influenced by administrators, which they attributed to the lack of personal interaction between teachers and administrators. Those findings are not consistent with the findings of the present study. In this study, teachers' self-efficacy was affected by administrator involvement through direct (i.e., helping with planning, mentoring, and involving teachers in decision-making) or indirect methods (i.e., hiring literacy

coaches, providing professional development, and purchasing research-based materials; see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1

Administrators Constrain or Support Teacher Decisions



Note. Teachers rely on their beliefs and knowledge about teaching reading to make decisions. Administrators' decisions can either support or constrain these decisions, leading to different outcomes.

When Teachers' Decisions are Constrained by Administrative Decisions

Participants were more likely to feel inefficacious when administrators constrained their decisions on literacy planning, implementation, or assessment. Several participants, including Audrey, Lucy, and Arden, had little to no autonomy when making decisions about their reading

groups, including which students participated in the groups, what content would be taught, and how to teach that content. Printy and Williams (2015) suggested that principals must "invite teachers to share in the decision-making required to implement the instructional program" to promote "high-quality instruction and high student performance" in RTI (p. 201). Participants whose administrators made these decisions for them mentioned feeling frustrated and overwhelmed, and that they doubted the efficacy of their instructional decisions and intervention outcomes.

This finding – that administrators' decisions not only impact teacher self-efficacy but possibly also impact the efficacy of RTI – is concerning. The primary goal of RTI is to provide excellent reading instruction to every student to prevent reading difficulties (Torgeson, 2002). Students in Tier II and -three interventions require even more support from excellent teachers than students who only receive Tier I instruction (Allington, 2009; Torgesen, 2002).

The suggestion that children require excellent instruction all day to ensure that RTI is effective leads me to believe that administrators should place students who have difficulty with reading into intervention groups taught by excellent reading teachers. According to the ILA (IRA, 2000), two characteristics of excellent teachers are (1) knowing a variety of ways to teach reading, when to use each method, and how to combine the methods into an effective instructional program; and (2) offering a variety of materials and texts for children to read. Results from this study revealed that teachers are not always prepared to make these decisions for excellent literacy teaching, and administrators do not always choose excellent reading teachers for interventionist roles. This affects the teachers who are unprepared for the challenge as well as the outcome of students in those interventions.

For example, Lucy's administrator decided to place Lucy in the role of reading interventionist during her first year of teaching without materials to support her. Lucy described her first 2 years of teaching as "*very emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting"* (GE_2). Part of this was due to overwhelming classroom and school-wide disciplinary issues, but another major contributor was the responsibilities placed on her by the administration for making instructional decisions while not providing the necessary support systems. According to Fletcher et al. (2013), effective and collaborative school leadership and the school leadership's support for school-wide behavior management are highly influential and lead to improved literacy education and literacy development. Lucy's administrator's decisions and actions, including the uncontrolled student behaviors, impacted not only her decisions on how to meet the needs of her students but also the effectiveness of her interventions. Other teachers felt similarly unprepared for making decisions on how to work with students having reading difficulties, but they had support systems around them including supportive administrators and materials to guide their instruction.

Fuchs and Deshler (2007) believed that for schools to effectively implement RTI, they require engaged administrators who "*set expectations* for adoption and implementation of RTI, *provide* the necessary *resources*, and support the use of procedures that *ensure fidelity* of implementation" (p. 131). This quote could be understood as saying that administrators should take a controlling (*set expectations* and *provide resources*), authoritative (*ensure fidelity*) stance on how RTI is implemented, mandating which materials should be used and how to use them, similar to Audrey's and Lucy's experiences in their schools. Audrey's district controlled every element of RTI, and she knew that her interventions were not effective. Lucy felt she was

effective when she was using her choice of teaching programs, but when the administration told her not to use that program, she resorted to finding free programs online. She, like Audrey, did not feel as though her interventions were effective.

Instead of understanding Fuchs and Deshler's (2007) quote in this way, it would be more appropriate to suggest that administrators set guidelines and expectations for RTI while engaging alongside teachers and specialists through the RTI process or through mentorship, supporting them in the task of helping readers reach proficiency. Findings from this study along with other research findings (e.g., Bean and Lillenstein, 2012) indicate that RTI is often implemented in ways that leave teachers feeling empowered through collaboration. These findings will be shared in detail in the discussion of my final theme: collaboration affects teacher self-efficacy.

When Teachers' Decisions are Supported by Administrative Decisions

Almost 40 years ago, before NCLB and ESSA, Holdaway (1984) advised that teachers needed to be "revalidated as the executive agent in making professional decisions" rather than them putting their trust in "narrowly methodological 'experts'" (i.e., research-based program authors; p. 4). This may be even more important now that education policy has placed a heavy emphasis on "research-based" literacy instruction and accountability and emphasizes teaching with fidelity. Jessica was the only teacher who mentioned that her administrators trusted the teachers to be professionals. She expressed how this trust from the administration gave her a sense of freedom to make decisions and to ask for help when she needed it. A potentially important consideration is Kraft and Papay's (2014) finding that teachers in supportive

professional environments become more effective teachers over time than teachers without that supportive professional environment.

A key influence in this study was curriculum. Administrators have the great responsibility of adopting literacy programs or designing literacy curriculum guides or frameworks. Once these are adopted, then the administrators decide how the teachers should use the programs or guides. Every participant in this study mentioned the influence of the district-mandated curriculum or their district's lack of a curriculum. Even though Holdaway (1984) advised that teachers should be executive decision-makers rather than trust in programs, current research (e.g., Cantrell et al., 2013; Siuty et al., 2018) have demonstrated that the provision of a district research- or standards-based curriculum can make a difference in teachers' self-efficacy if they are able to implement it while also basing decisions on their knowledge of students, pedagogical knowledge, and student data. Siuty et al. (2018) suggested that a curriculum helps teachers differentiate their instruction and increases teacher self-efficacy in literacy instruction. This study adds to this extant research by finding that teachers who understood the purpose of the curriculum while also understanding that the curriculum could be adjusted to meet the needs of learners had greater efficacy in making decisions during planning and while implementing those plans.

For example, Amy believed that her district's learning progression pushed students to become proficient readers too early, but she also believed that the progression forced teachers to monitor student progress and adjust their instruction accordingly to ensure that students are meeting the requirements of the progression. Wendi's school administration required teachers to use a workshop model in literacy, but they also supported teachers with professional

development on how to use said model. She felt that her school's literacy instruction was effective because of this policy and the training that accompanied it. Brett's anxiety about starting a new position in language arts was alleviated because of a new literacy program that includes many resources to use for planning and implementing instruction. This is an important finding when we consider that Cantrell et al. (2013) concluded that teacher efficacy in literacy teaching might have a greater impact on students' comprehension development compared with following a reading program with fidelity.

In conclusion, this study adds to the current research that suggests that when administrators remove teachers' autonomy in decision-making through a mandated curriculum and RTI policies, teachers' self-efficacy is negatively affected. Conversely, when administrators provide guidelines for instruction and interventions and support teachers through curriculum and RTI policies, teachers' self-efficacy is positively affected, which prior research has indicated will likely result in students' greater literacy achievement.

Theme 2: Teachers' Knowledge of Reading Instruction Influences Decision-Making

Teachers cultivate knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning through their experiences and training. They have knowledge and beliefs about what students require to become proficient readers, but factors such as the curriculum, teaching experience, and the ability to manage the classroom sometimes have more influence on teachers' decisions than their beliefs and knowledge.

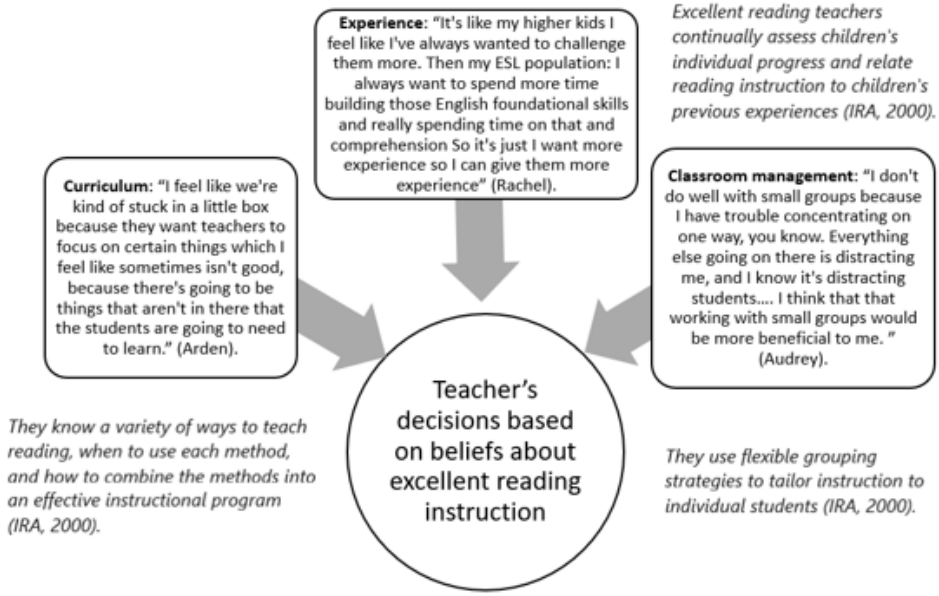
Many researchers have attempted to define the characteristics of an excellent reading teacher (e.g., Block et al., 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 2018; Valli et al., 2012). The ILA (IRA, 2000) published the following list of six qualities of excellent reading teachers:

1. They understand reading and writing development and believe all children can learn to read and write.
2. They continually assess children's individual progress and relate reading instruction to children's previous experiences.
3. They know a variety of ways to teach reading, when to use each method, and how to combine the methods into an effective instructional program.
4. They offer a variety of materials and texts for children to read.
5. They use flexible grouping strategies to tailor instruction to individual students.
6. They are good reading "coaches" (that is, they provide help strategically).

This list emphasizes the importance of a teacher's beliefs about students and learning as well as their pedagogical and content knowledge in making decisions when planning for instruction, implementing those plans, and assessing readers.

Figure 5.2

Teachers' Knowledge of Reading Instruction Influences Decision-Making



Note. Teacher's decisions based on their knowledge and beliefs about teaching and students are often supplanted by other factors such as the curriculum, experience, and classroom management. These IRA quotes are three characteristics of excellent reading teachers and are presented here to demonstrate that participants had some knowledge about the decisions that excellent reading teachers make to support students; however, because of other influences, they were unable to make these decisions for their classrooms.

Numerous research studies (e.g., Bransford et al., 2005; Pitkäniemi, 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018) have agreed with the ILA that decisions are influenced by a teacher's beliefs, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge. Unfortunately, these beliefs and knowledge are not always prioritized in decision-making. Administrators are one external influence on teachers' decisions, as discussed in the previous section. This study found that administrators' decisions often constrain or support teachers' decisions based on their personal beliefs and knowledge. Other key influences found in this study that take precedence over teachers' beliefs and knowledge are the curriculum, teaching experience, and the ability to manage the classroom (see Figure 5.2).

The Influence of the Curriculum on Teachers' Decisions

My findings revealed that the curriculum influenced all 10 participants' decisions when planning, implementing, and assessing, whereas beliefs about teaching and learning were primarily influential only on teachers' implementation decisions. I have already discussed in part how district and school administrators' adoption of programs and curriculum mandates influence teachers by constraining or supporting their decision-making. Some participants stated that curriculum requirements such as pacing guides, curriculum frameworks, and scripted reading programs guide their planning and instruction even when the curriculum is in conflict with their beliefs about their students' needs. This effect has been found by other researchers as well (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Griffith & Groulx, 2014; Ruppar, et al., 2015). However, Datnow and Costellano (2000) found that teachers are more likely to use a program willingly if it fits with their personal beliefs about good literacy teaching.

The findings of this study pointed to a difference between experienced and novice

teachers in the extent to which the curriculum rather than beliefs influence teachers' planning, implementation, and assessment decisions. Current research is varied regarding the effect of teacher experience on the decisions teachers make. Pitkäniemi (2010) and Bond and Dykstra (1998) have found no correlations between teacher experience and their effectiveness, but others have pointed to experience as an influential factor (Ruppar et al., 2015; Jordan et al., 2018). Participants in this study who had more experience considered their students' needs first when planning for instruction. They were more concerned about students' foundational reading knowledge than keeping up with curriculum pacing guides, which they felt were not aligned with students' needs. This ability to base curriculum decisions on their beliefs and knowledge about effective literacy teaching and their students has been demonstrated by other researchers to be more crucial for improving students' reading than adhering to a program (Cantrell et al., 2013).

Experienced teachers likely have more experiential knowledge and understanding of students to help them make quick in-the-moment decisions based on students' responses to instruction (Pitkäniemi, 2010). Excellent reading teachers respond to students' needs, strengths, and interests rather than relying solely on a program or instructional approach that has been "validated" by research (Collins & Ferri, 2016; IRA, 2000; Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). They are also experts in using the core curriculum "more flexibly and creatively than the publisher recommends" (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Findings from this study indicate that experienced teachers may have more characteristics of "excellent reading teachers" simply because they have more experience. For example, Brett has 17 years of teaching experience and she has seen the power of focusing on "the basics" in both mathematics and literacy before

tackling more difficult subjects. Because she has witnessed the effects of establishing a solid foundation of student knowledge, she is more likely to ensure that students have foundational skills before she moves on to the next concept in a curriculum pacing guide or framework.

Most of the novice teachers in this study remained faithful to the district curriculum requirements and had difficulty negotiating between their beliefs and what the mandated school or district curriculum pacing guides, scripted reading programs, or curriculum resources stated. These findings correspond with current research (e.g. Griffith, 2008; Griffith & Groulx, 2014), which has suggested that teachers who have scripted curriculum will either ignore their own beliefs about literacy development or literacy instruction in order to teach the program with fidelity, or they will adjust the curriculum to fit their own beliefs.

The Influence of Experience on Teachers' Decisions

Bratsch-Hines et al. (2017) found that teachers with more experience and knowledge of reading made more appropriate decisions on how to work with their students. This connection between experience and teachers' planning, implementation, and assessment decisions in this study was already seen in the discussion on the influence of curriculum. Next, I discuss this connection as demonstrated through teachers' decisions on implementing flexible grouping strategies.

According to the ILA (IRA, 2000), one characteristic of an excellent reading teacher is using flexible grouping to differentiate instruction. Excellent reading teachers are also experts in using a variety of materials and instructional methods to differentiate their instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018; IRA, 2000). The novice teachers in my study knew that their students would benefit from small, differentiated groups in their classrooms, but their decisions to

incorporate small groups into their instruction were influenced by a lack of experience or knowledge on how to differentiate and how to manage the classroom. If they did utilize small groups for differentiated instruction, they were uncertain whether the small group activities were beneficial for all students – especially for higher-achieving students and English learners. Several expressed a desire to begin using small groups or to improve their implementation of small groups.

The difference between novice teachers' and experienced teachers' comfort in using different types of instructional grouping to meet students' needs likely stems from teachers' self-efficacy constructed through previous successful experiences (Bandura, 1997). Most of the experienced teachers felt confident in their abilities to teach reading, as opposed to the novice teachers, who mostly confessed to feeling inadequate when teaching reading. As teachers make decisions that lead to "successful" student outcomes, their self-efficacy increases (Bandura, 1997). Prior research has indicated that higher self-efficacy can result in teachers taking more responsibility for making instructional decisions and providing instruction for developing students' literacy (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Lee et al., 1991).

The Influence of Classroom Management on Teachers' Decisions

Classroom management is one reason given by novice teachers for not differentiating instruction through small groups. Audrey specifically mentioned that she had difficulty focusing on the small group while other students work around the room. Other participants mentioned that they divide the class in half to make instruction more manageable; thus, their "smaller group" of half the class receives instruction while the other half works in literacy centers. Denton (2012) advised that teachers require "substantial professional development" in

classroom management if RTI is going to be effective (p. 236). RTI relies on teachers' ability to implement differentiated instruction through small groups in tiers one and two.

Even though only one teacher, Lucy, specifically mentioned the influence of school-wide student behaviors and specific classroom student behaviors on her instructional decisions, the significant role of classroom management should not be eliminated from this discussion. Lucy divulged that her administrators were too busy to check on teachers' implementation of RTI, and Tier III interventions were being cancelled "a lot" because of behavior issues. Administrators were also too busy to ensure that teachers were conducting progress-monitoring, a key element of effective RTI. Lucy's scenario makes it clear that Fletcher et al. (2013) were correct in their finding that two of the factors with the most influence on improving literacy education and development were effective and collaborative school leadership and the school leadership's support for school-wide behavior management. Lucy's situation illustrates why behavior management is crucial. Behaviors distract from the work of teaching and differentiating instruction.

In conclusion, this study found that both novice and experienced teachers possessed knowledge and beliefs about effective reading instruction. However, several teachers, primarily those with less teaching experience, were largely influenced by district curricula not aligning with their beliefs about teaching reading and their knowledge of the students in their classrooms. Other teachers were unable to implement differentiated instruction because they either lacked the knowledge of how to differentiate, which comes from prior successful teaching experiences, or they were unsure of how to manage the classroom for effective small-group instruction. Finally, school-wide and classroom student behaviors influenced teacher

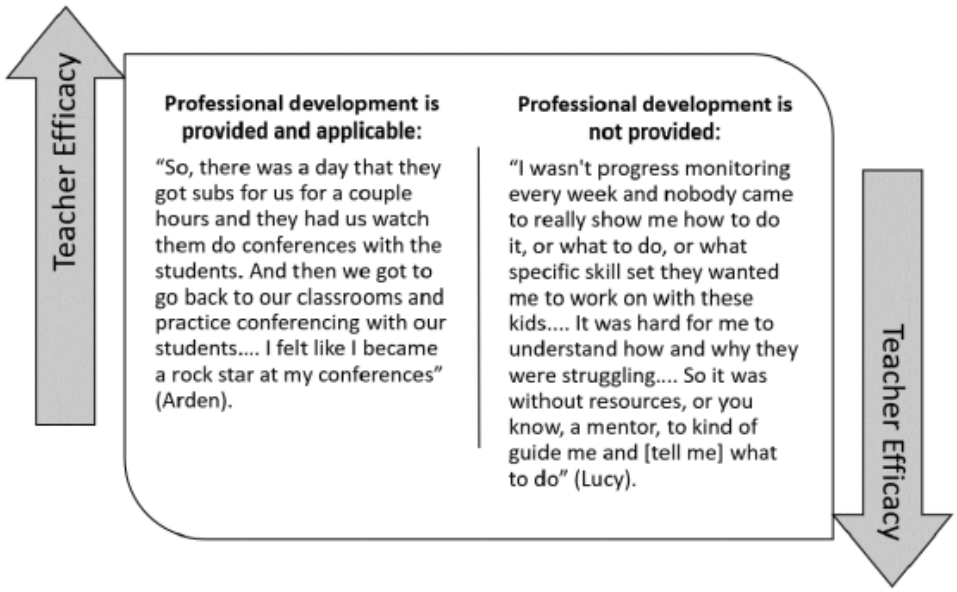
decisions on how to effectively follow RTI procedures. These findings align with current research and add to the discussion on the effect of internal and external influences on teachers' implementation of reading instruction.

Theme 3: Professional Development Influences Teachers' Decision-Making

Professional development, including coaching, mentoring, and modeling from other teachers, administrators, or coaches, matters to teachers' ability to make planning, implementation, and assessment plans for teaching students to read. Scanlon et al. (2008) argued, "[i]f RTI is to realize its promise, it is critical that more emphasis be placed on understanding the nature and characteristics of instruction that are effective in reducing the incidence of early reading difficulties and on how to help teachers become more effective in this regard" (p. 347).

Figure 5.3

Influence of Professional Development on Teachers' Decisions and Efficacy



Note. Two examples of how teachers were impacted through professional development or a lack thereof.

The findings in this study, as well as current research on professional development and reading instruction, suggest that professional development influences teachers decision-making when planning, implementing those plans, and assessing students in a way that also increases teachers' efficacy when meeting students' reading needs (see Figure 5.3).

The Positive Impact of Professional Development

Novice teachers obviously lack professional experiences. As I have already demonstrated through this discussion, experience matters to a teacher's decision-making (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2017; Jordan et al., 2018) as well as to a teacher's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Ruppar et al., 2015). To reconcile the difference between the amount of personal teaching experience they have and the knowledge they need to successfully make decisions for teaching all readers, the participants in this study relied on their curriculum, their colleagues, or professional development to help them make instructional decisions.

Several participants watched video-recorded lessons available through their district curriculum. Participants also watched reading specialists model lessons in person. After watching these modeled lessons, participants mentioned that they gained confidence in teaching or assessing students. Bandura (1997) called this "vicarious experiences," which is one way teachers can develop self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a perceived state – not based on the skills one has but on what one believes one can accomplish with those skills (Bandura, 1997). Watching other teachers successfully work through a task influenced participants' belief that they also could be successful in that task. Not only that, but in all instances mentioned by participants, they *were* successful in their tasks. A great example from this study was Arden. She watched the reading specialist conduct reading conferences, and then she implemented

conferences in her classroom. Now she considers herself a "*rock star*" at conferencing (GE_.5).

Participants took their professional development into their own hands when it was not provided by the school. Wendi was ready to quit teaching after 1 year, but that summer she turned to professional learning books for teaching advice. Her studies resulted in her reading instruction improving "*tremendously*" the next year because she had more knowledge on which to base her decisions. This scenario demonstrates that professional development can result in improved instructional decisions even when the teacher is not gaining experience through teaching.

Denton (2012) advised that, "[i]f classroom teachers are to provide effective Tier II intervention during the school day, they will likely need substantial professional development and ongoing support in the implementation of scientifically validated reading intervention programs and in effective classroom management strategies" (p. 236). Multiple other studies have found that professional development in the use of data to make decisions about instruction significantly improve student achievement due to teachers' increased capacity for making data-driven decisions (e.g., Lai & McNaughton, 2016; Marsh et al., 2010; Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016). Observing student outcomes was not within the scope of this study; however, my findings reinforced those of other aforementioned studies that teachers who lack efficacy in teaching reading are impacted by professional development, especially when accompanied by coaching. Coaching served as the "ongoing support" for teachers that Denton believed is necessary.

The Positive Impact of Professional Development through Coaching

Most of the participants were influenced by literacy coaches. Castillo (2016) found that

intensive professional development and coaching significantly increased teachers' perceived skills in implementing RTI and working with data. Multiple researchers (e.g., Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011) have found strong evidence that providing both professional development and coaching, rather than just one without the other, results in higher-quality teacher instructional practices. Drawing this conclusion was beyond the scope of the present study; however, the impact of coaching on teachers' ability to plan, implement those plans, and assess readers was clear.

Amy's coach early in her teaching career taught her to use running records as well as how to plan for instruction using that data, and she continued to use that information 12 years later for making instructional decisions. Arden and Rachel did not consider themselves effective reading teachers, but both remarked that they could ask their reading coaches or mentors when they have questions or need assistance, and this gave them a sense of efficacy. Participants' coaches also modeled lessons, provided materials, gave supportive feedback on lessons, and suggested professional books to read. Without exception, participants who mentioned the impact of coaching on their instructional decisions also expressed how "good" their coaches were. It is vital that coaches exemplify the characteristics of "excellent reading teachers" (IRA, 2000) because Ruppar et al. (2015) found that teachers who relied on "experts" for help adopted those experts' practices rather than adapting their own.

In conclusion, this study confirms current research that indicates that professional development is essential for effective decisions for core instruction and interventions – especially when classroom teachers provide Tier II interventions in the classroom. Teachers' knowledge about reading instruction, their practices, and their self-efficacy as reading teachers

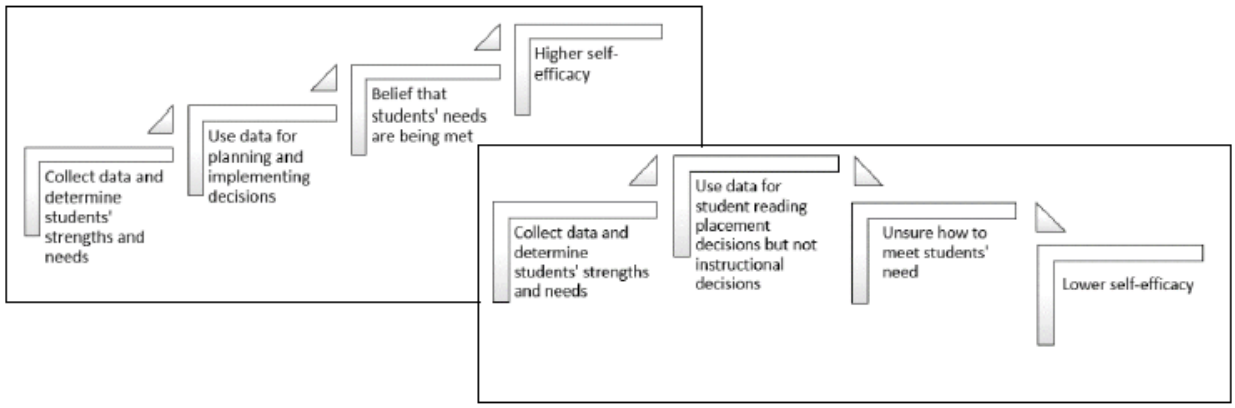
can be affected in the long term with professional development. All teachers benefit from excellent reading coaches in concert with professional development because coaching provides ongoing support.

Theme 4: Teachers' Beliefs About Using Data for Instruction Influences Their Decision-Making

When teachers believe they are using data to plan for instruction or are provided with an opportunity to use student data to place students in reading groups or interventions, they feel more efficacious in their ability to meet the reading needs of their students.

Figure 5.4

Two Ways Data Influence Teachers' Decisions and the Impact on Teacher Efficacy



Note. Teachers who were able to make instructional decisions based on student data believed that their students' reading needs were being met and had higher self-efficacy as a result. Teachers who used data to place students into reading groups but not necessarily to inform their instruction were uncertain if their students' needs were being met. This is a sign of lower self-efficacy.

However, knowledge gathered from data is only effective if teachers understand what to do with the information collected. Data-driven decisions include knowing what types of data to collect, analyzing the data, making meaning from the data, and then using this information to answer questions about students (Means et al., 2011). When teachers are unable to use the

information they gather from data to determine if students' needs are being met or if they are making progress, their efficacy is often negatively affected.

The Influence of Data on Teachers' Decisions

This study found that teachers speak confidently about literacy decisions when they collect student data, even when they do not use the data to drive instruction. Many of the participants, including Rachel, Audrey, Amy, and Tiffany, described how they collect specific information on their students to inform their instruction. They mentioned using these data to take a close look at students, specifically by identifying specific student needs and monitoring student progress. Jessica stated that collecting data on students' progress validated her professionalism, and Katie explained how teachers use data collaboratively in her school to affect student growth. Each of these teachers demonstrated efficacy by believing they could change students' academic outcomes by collecting student data and identifying needs.

The novice teachers in this study used data to make straightforward decisions, such as which students qualified for Tier II instruction based on district assessments and district guidelines. They had difficulty using data for other instructional decisions. According to Datnow and Hubbard (2015), this is common among teachers regardless of teaching experience. By contrast, experienced teachers in this study, specifically Amy, Tiffany, and Katie, each implemented data-driven instruction, resulting in positive student outcomes. This enabled them to speak confidently about their data-driven instructional processes.

The difference found between teachers in this study corresponds with a study by Means et al. (2011) on teachers' ability to use data to inform their instruction. The authors found that only approximately half of the teachers in their study were able to determine which data to rely

on and how to use data to determine instructional strategies. Additionally, of the half who were able to design a lesson based on the data, 73% looked only at state testing data while ignoring classroom assessment data (Means et al., 2011, p. 42). Using data to plan for instruction requires depths of knowledge about testing and data analysis that many teachers do not possess (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015; Means et al., 2011) as well as depths of knowledge about reading development that many novice teachers lack (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015). The novice teachers did not have the necessary understanding of effective reading instruction or of how to use data for planning instruction. The experienced teachers were better equipped to base instructional decisions on data; however, this study could not determine to what extent the experienced teachers understood data collection, analysis, and use.

There is a paucity of research on the relationship between data-driven instructional decisions and teacher self-efficacy. However, research *has* demonstrated that data-driven instruction can improve student achievement, especially when teachers are supported through professional development, coaching, or collaboration with colleagues and administrators (Lai & McNaughton, 2016; Marsh, et al. , 2010; Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016). As a result of improved student achievement, teachers' self-efficacy will likely improve as well (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). This study draws on these findings to posit that when teachers feel as though their data-driven instruction results in positive student outcomes, their efficacy will increase; moreover, when teachers do not see positive results or are unable to design and implement data-driven instruction, their efficacy will decrease.

Difficulties with Using Data for Instructional Decisions

The findings discussed above illustrate that teachers generally agree with researchers

who believe that excellent reading teachers base instruction on students' strengths and needs (e.g., Collins & Ferri, 2016; IRA, 2000; Watts-Taffe et al., 2012), and that using data to make decisions about instruction improves student learning (e.g., Lai & McNaughton, 2016; Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016). Unfortunately, current studies indicate that teachers, similar to many of my participants, are often unprepared to make decisions using student data (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015; Lai & McNaughton, 2016; Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016). As mentioned above, teachers in this study discussed how they collected student data and even expressed a measure of efficacy in using them to identify students' needs or to place students in tiered reading groups. However, the findings of this study reinforce those of other studies in that data collection does not always result in differentiated instruction (Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016; Valli & Buese, 2007).

Lucy, Rachel, Audrey, and Jessica collected student data to make instructional decisions or to determine student placement in tiered groups. Each one of these ladies also confessed not knowing how to differentiate her reading instruction. Lucy participated in RTI data chats every 9 weeks, but she did not know how to progress-monitor or determine which skills her students required. Rachel used data as a "starting point for planning," but she also said, "I feel like a lot of my kiddos might be lower readers" and then rated her literacy teaching ability as "a five" (GE_2.2). Audrey collected data through "aggressive monitoring" but did not differentiate through small groups even though she "tried and tried and tried" (GE_5). Jessica was "pretty confident" in using data to drive instruction, but the example she provided for data-driven instruction was her ability to recommend "just-right books" to students and parents (GE_4). It was obvious that these less-experienced teachers knew the importance of using data but other

influences kept them from collecting data or using data in effective ways.

Without personal experience or professional development on why students should be assessed and how teachers can use those assessment results to plan and implement differentiated lessons, it might be unreasonable to expect novice teachers to use assessments to impact their instructional decisions (Lai & McNaughton, 2016; Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016). Datnow and Hubbard (2015) suggested that to effectively use data to make instructional decisions, literacy teachers require a deep understanding of the curriculum standards, how students learn to read, and how to teach reading. As demonstrated in this study, participants had a conception of what research suggests students need to become proficient readers, and most knew that students need differentiated instruction, but it was more likely that "contexts" such as curriculum or administrators influenced decision-making rather than teachers' knowledge about students and learning. The inability to use data for making decisions on how to differentiate instruction leads to lower self-efficacy as these novice teachers illustrated, a finding that adds to the current research on the relationship between data-driven instruction and teacher efficacy (e.g., Goddard & Kim, 2018).

In conclusion, the teachers knew that basing instructional decisions on student data is a sign of effective reading instruction. Most participants in this study shared that they used data to pinpoint gaps in students' reading or to place students into RTI intervention groups, but only the teachers with more experience were able to explain how these data influenced their differentiated instruction. Novice teachers had difficulty connecting data collection with decisions on how to plan for or implement instruction based on students' strengths and needs, or other influences such as classroom management kept them from implementing

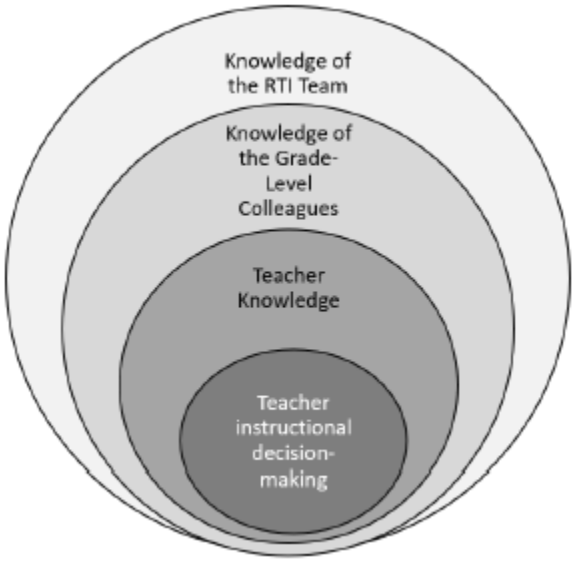
differentiated instruction. Teachers who were able to effectively use data to drive their instructional decisions and saw positive student outcomes had higher efficacy in teaching readers, whereas those who were unable to effectively differentiate instruction had lower efficacy in teaching readers.

Theme 5: Collaboration Influences Teachers' Decision-Making

Collaboration with colleagues proved to be important for both novice and experienced teachers in this study. Collaboration provided a means of supplementing teachers' knowledge about students and reading instruction when making instructional decisions.

Figure 5.5

Collaboration Influences Teachers' Decision-Making



Note. When teachers are able to make decisions collaboratively, they are drawing on the collective knowledge of the group.

As previously discussed in this chapter, the teachers in this study (and teachers in general) rely on their knowledge of students, reading development, and reading pedagogy to make decisions

when planning, implementing those plans, and assessing students (Bransford et al., 2005; Pitkäniemi, 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015; Griffith & Lacina, 2018). Having the collective knowledge of their peers was influential for teachers who alone might not have made the same decisions or have been able to implement differentiated instruction (see Figure 5.5).

Collaborative Planning and Teaching Supports Teachers

Collaborative decision-making and working collaboratively provided the support that the teachers required to feel more efficacious in their decisions, especially for novice teachers. Jessica considered this drawing upon the *"collective knowledge"* of her colleagues (GE_4). This was especially beneficial for novice teachers Rachel and Jessica, who doubted their own decision-making capabilities and reported asking colleagues to validate their literacy instructional decisions. Their efficacy in teaching reading grew through these collaborative experiences, which aligns with extant research that had demonstrated that teacher collaboration leads to positive teacher outcomes (Goddard & Kim, 2018) and increased teacher efficacy (Peterson et al., 2008; Takahashi, 2011).

Teachers collaborated with colleagues to share the responsibility of meeting students' needs across their grade-level or school community. They planned together, analyzed data together, and implemented fluid, differentiated, small groups taught by teachers across the grade level. Katie and Amy even expressed that this type of collaboration ensured that no students were forgotten or "left behind." Brett believed that collaboration between grade levels was the reason for her school's successful testing scores, which might be true according to the finding of Goddard et al. (2015) that schools with greater "collective efficacy," or efficacy constructed through collaborative experiences, had greater levels of student achievement.

Collaboration that resulted in effective differentiated instruction contributed to teacher's positive self-efficacy in this study. Amy's grade level was an example of this. Her grade-level team divided students up according to their reading data and then set up classroom activities before school so their first-graders could be engaged in data-driven activities before the bell even rang. Amy felt that this collaborative activity effectively met the needs of all first-graders. The findings of this study add to research that established a positive connection between teacher collaboration and the implementation of differentiated instruction, and between differentiated instruction and efficacy (Goddard & Kim, 2018, p. 2).

RTI Processes Support Collaborative Decision-Making

RTI requires all educational stakeholders to work closely together (Vaughn, et al., 2008). Participants' experiences varied with RTI teams. Some participants were not included in the RTI meetings. They simply handed over student data, and the administrators made tiered instructional decisions.

Researchers in the field of RTI (e.g., Burns & Gibbons, 2013; Denton, 2012; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Dougherty Stahl, 2011) believe that RTI is a way to address the needs of all students, not just those who are having difficulty reading. This primarily refers to the tiered model in which every student receives excellent instruction in Tier I and every student who needs additional instruction receives it in Tier II. However, this study adds to the definition of how RTI addresses the needs of all students. Participants who were a part of the RTI team decision-making session found that the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers, administrators, and reading specialists, and the resulting collective decisions made by the group, empowered them to make decisions for all readers in their classrooms.

In conclusion, collaboration, whether with a grade-level group or an RTI team, supports teachers' decision-making in several ways. Novice teachers make decisions based on the collective knowledge of the group and find validation for their teaching decisions from colleagues who they believe are more knowledgeable or "experts" in teaching reading. Teachers also collaborated on finding ways to work together to meet students' needs across the grade level. When teachers have the opportunity to collaborate and see positive results from their collaborative efforts, their efficacy in teaching reading will improve. In other words, they will believe in their ability to meet the needs of their students.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Administrators

- Provide individualized professional development and literacy coaching to develop teachers' knowledge of reading development and best practices in reading instruction

New teachers enter the classroom with limited knowledge of teaching and content because universities cannot prepare them for every possible teaching scenario. The first years of teaching experience are instrumental in forming teachers' foundational knowledge and beliefs as well as forming their self-efficacy beliefs. Knowledge of reading development and best practices in reading instruction are essential for all teaching decisions and make a positive difference in student outcomes, which then leads to greater teacher efficacy. Additionally, professional development and coaching are instrumental in developing teachers' ability to use data to differentiate instruction. Professional development and coaching related to teachers' specific needs impact their decisions and instruction.

- Provide a research-based curriculum and the professional development required to implement it in a student-centered way

Once you have done this, allow teachers to make instructional decisions on how to use the curriculum based on their knowledge of teaching reading and of their students. Both novice teachers and experienced teachers rely on district-adopted programs or curricula to show them what and how to teach reading. If the programs are designed to meet the components of balanced literacy instruction or the qualifications for outstanding literacy instruction, then teachers are –, for better lack of a term "in good hands." They will have guidance on specific and explicit instruction. They will have built-in scaffolds and integration of reading and writing activities. Additionally, most programs will provide information on how to differentiate for learners and the materials to do so. Knowledgeable teachers will be able to adapt the program to meet the needs of their students, so provide teachers with professional development as well.

- Place literacy teachers into interventionist positions who have the characteristics of excellent reading teachers and who have positive teaching experiences

Students require excellent instruction all day, but this is especially important for students who require additional explicit instruction in reading. Teachers develop efficacy through "successful" teaching experiences. Efficacious teachers – those who believe they can help any reader develop into a "proficient" reader – will see greater student reading gains than teachers who lack pedagogy and/or content knowledge.

Recommendations for Teacher Educators

- Emphasize teaching the foundational knowledge that teachers rely on to make decisions

Lists such as the ILA's (IRA, 2000) characteristics of Excellent Reading Teachers should be used as a guide for deciding what to teach in literacy methods courses. Literacy instructional decisions, including how to use data to drive instruction, depend on a teacher's depth of understanding of the curriculum standards, how students learn to read, and how to teach reading.

- Teach preservice teachers the importance of using data and provide hands-on experience using real or mock student data to plan for instruction

A teacher's ability to use data has been demonstrated by research to affect student growth and teacher efficacy. Bandura (1997) believed that teachers' efficacy beliefs develop in their first few years of teaching; therefore, having a foundational knowledge of collecting, analyzing, and using data to plan for instruction could lead to novice teachers' greater self-efficacy.

Recommendations for Teachers

- Become knowledgeable about teaching reading, reading development, and using data to drive instruction

Research (including this study) indicates that teachers' knowledge of reading and reading pedagogy influences their effective literacy decisions. Teachers with more training in teaching reading and the development of readers are better able to make planning, implementation, and assessment decisions when students have difficulty learning to read. Novice teachers can gain this knowledge through professional development, self-study, and mentoring. Administrators should be provided with suggestions on the types of training that could help teachers meet the needs of their students.

- Participate in literacy coaching if it is available

Teachers in this study, both the novice and more experienced ones, explained how impactful literacy coaches have been on their ability to teach reading and for meeting the needs of students who have difficulty learning to read. Other scholars have also reported that coaching helps to extend the benefit of professional development, which can lead to more effective literacy teaching.

- Collaborate with your colleagues

Teachers benefit from sharing their knowledge, skills, and resources with each other. This is especially crucial for teachers who are less experienced with teaching literacy or who work with students who have difficulty reading. Teachers also benefit from sharing the responsibility of helping each student grow in his or her reading abilities. Teachers should learn how to analyze and discuss student data to plan for and implement grade-level reading instruction or interventions. The teachers who feel the most prepared for teaching reading should be assigned to conduct grade-level reading interventions while the other teachers provide appropriate instruction for on-level and advanced readers.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Study teachers' "real-time" decisions when working with students who have difficulty learning to read.

Consider several levels of teachers' decisions: (1) who is placed in an intervention group and why, (2) how the teacher decided on the instructional focus of the group, (3) what materials the teacher used for interventions and why, (4) and how the teacher knew that students were making progress. Such a study, if completed, would offer a deeper

understanding of the decisions teachers make when working with students who have difficulty learning to read as well as the influences on teachers' decisions when working with readers.

2. Examine the connection between administrators who constrain teachers' literacy instructional decisions and student reading outcomes more closely.

This study found that how administrators engaged with teachers in making literacy decisions impacted teachers' feelings of efficacy. Prior research on self-efficacy has demonstrated that teachers with higher self-efficacy have better student outcomes than teachers with lower self-efficacy.

3. Design a tool for defining teachers' beliefs about "excellent reading instruction."

Teachers in this study had ideas about what it means to be an excellent reading teacher. However, their ideas about excellent instruction varied and were often unclear because I did not have a specific tool for determining each participant's beliefs.

4. Design a tool for defining teachers' understanding of classroom assessment and data-driven instruction.

When asked about their use of data for driving instruction, the teachers in this study primarily referred to data collected through district benchmark assessments and other formal measures. Several teachers also discussed their use of running records or observations. They also had differing views on how to use data for making instructional decisions. Some said that they used data to make decisions, but the decisions were about student placement rather than instruction. Having a tool to collect teachers' specific ideas about classroom assessment and data-driven instruction would help to develop more strategic survey and interview questions about teachers' decision-making and instructional practices.

5. Examine the relationship between data-driven instructional decisions in literacy and teacher self-efficacy.

Research suggests that data-driven instruction leads to student growth, and student growth leads to greater teacher efficacy. It was difficult to find research on the relationship between data-driven instructional decisions in literacy and teacher self-efficacy. Research does indicate that greater teacher efficacy leads to greater student growth. If this is true, then additional research could influence how schools treat the use of classroom or school data.

Conclusion

> Instructors who judge themselves to be capable of orchestrating the complex knowledge and skills required to design instruction based on individual students' needs, taking into account the challenges of a particular teaching context, will likely exert greater effort, persistence, and resilience as a result of stronger self-efficacy beliefs. (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007, p. 946)

This quote from Tschannen-Moran and Hoy speaks to the heart of this study. All students require excellent reading teachers, but children who have difficulty learning to read especially need skilled teachers who believe they can help any child become a reader (i.e., who have strong self-efficacy). These teachers have a clear understanding of curriculum standards, how students learn to read, and how to teach reading. They are able to use student data to make informed decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. They use data to determine whether students are making progress or if they require additional or different interventions. Teachers like those described by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy are more likely to make decisions based on students' strengths and needs rather than being overly influenced by external forces such as curriculum and administrative mandates.

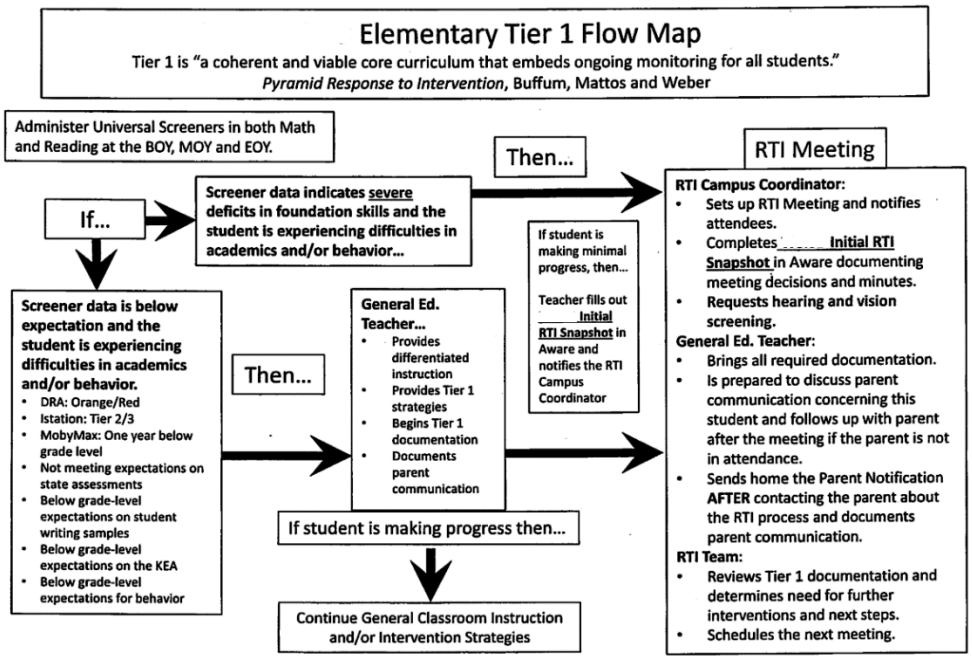
The findings of this study provide evidence that teacher decisions are more heavily influenced by external forces when teachers do not have a clear understanding of their students or of effective literacy instruction. When this occurs, teachers' efficacy is also affected,

which other research has shown can affect student outcomes. Therefore, administrators who support teachers' decision-making through (1) providing professional development on effective literacy instruction and using data to drive instruction, (2) offering opportunities for teachers to learn from and work with their colleagues, and (3) setting guidelines and expectations for RTI while engaging alongside teachers and specialists in making literacy decisions will have teachers who make decisions for planning, implementing those plans, and assessing students based on their students' needs. This in turn will develop teacher's efficacy beliefs and hopefully result in fewer students requiring Tier II and -three interventions.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE SCHOOL DISTRICT RTI FLOW MAP

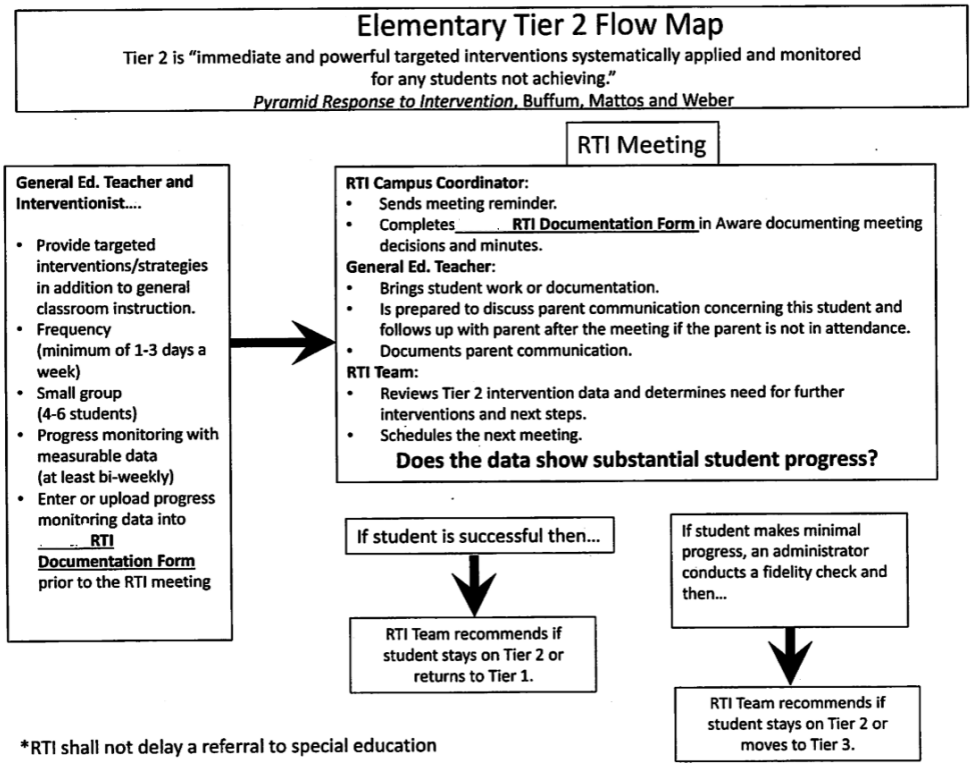
Tier I:



*RTI shall not delay a referral to special education

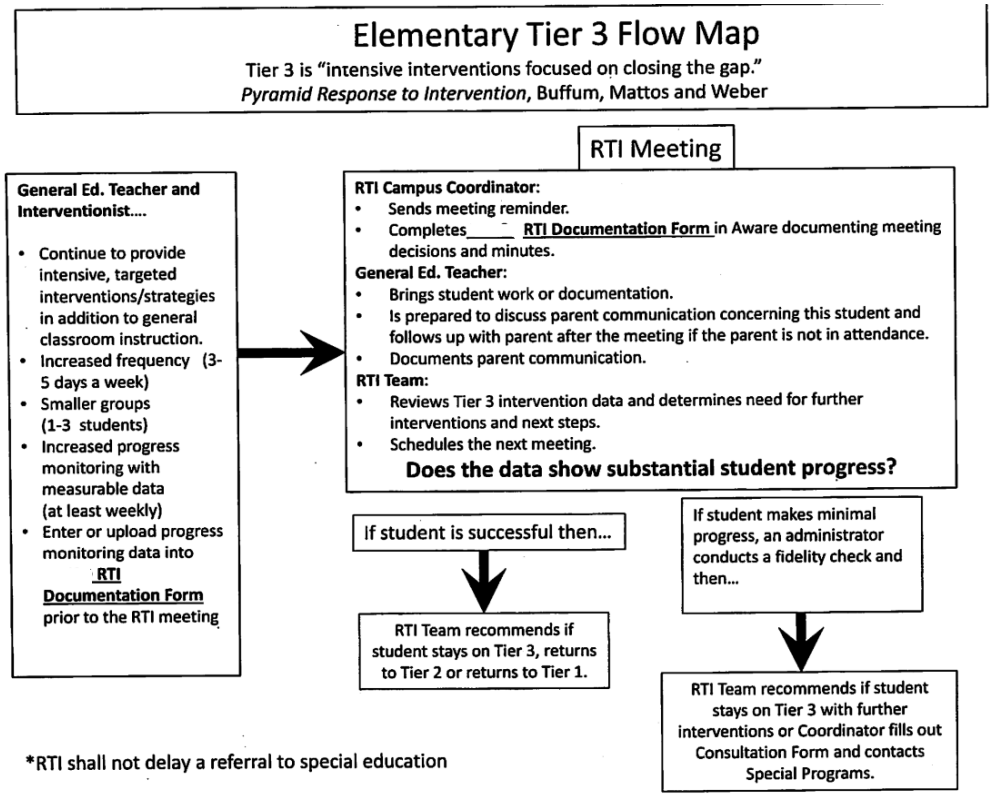
Revised September 4, 2018

Tier II:



*RTI shall not delay a referral to special education

Tier III:


Elementary Tier 3 Flow Map
Tier 3 is "intensive interventions focused on closing the gap."
Pyramid Response to Intervention, Buffum, Mattos and Weber
RTI Meeting
General Ed. Teacher and Interventionist....
• Continue to provide intensive, targeted interventions/strategies in addition to general classroom instruction.
• Increased frequency (3-5 days a week)
• Smaller groups (1-3 students)
• Increased progress monitoring with measurable data (at least weekly)
• Enter or upload progress monitoring data into RTI Documentation Form prior to the RTI meeting
RTI Campus Coordinator:
• Sends meeting reminder.
• Completes RTI Documentation Form in Aware documenting meeting decisions and minutes.
General Ed. Teacher:
• Brings student work or documentation.
• Is prepared to discuss parent communication concerning this student and follows up with parent after the meeting if the parent is not in attendance.
• Documents parent communication.
RTI Team:
• Reviews Tier 3 intervention data and determines need for further interventions and next steps.
• Schedules the next meeting.
Does the data show substantial student progress?
If student is successful then...
RTI Team recommends if student stays on Tier 3, returns to Tier 2 or returns to Tier 1.
If student makes minimal progress, an administrator conducts a fidelity check and then...
RTI Team recommends if student stays on Tier 3 with further interventions or Coordinator fills out Consultation Form and contacts Special Programs.
*RTI shall not delay a referral to special education

APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONS AND HOW THEY FIT INTO THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. When you think about “below-proficient” readers, what things come to mind? (beliefs and expectations)

2. What might be the cause of reading difficulties? (Beliefs, expectations)

3. How do you cope with meeting the needs of children with reading difficulties? (Self-Efficacy, expectations)

4. How confident are you that you can help any struggling reader reach proficiency? (Self-Efficacy)

6. What knowledge or resources do you draw on to help you cope with students’ reading difficulties? (Beliefs, contexts, self-efficacy)

7. What policies and procedures does your school campus or school district have in place for identifying and working with children who have difficulty learning to read? (Contexts)

8. Have your views on “below-proficient” readers changed after becoming a teacher in your current school or school district? If so, how have they changed and why do you think this is? (Contexts, beliefs)

9. What data do you use when making decisions about student proficiency in reading? Why do you use this data? (Self-Efficacy, contexts, beliefs)

APPENDIX C

QUALTRICS SURVEY – EXCLUDING TORP QUESTIONS

Start of Block: Informed Consent

University of North Texas Informed Consent for Studies with Adults Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: Decisions Teachers Make When Students are Labeled "Below-Proficient" Readers

RESEARCH TEAM: Carol Wickstrom (Principal Investigator) and Traci Pettet (Student Investigator). You are being asked to participate in a research study. Taking part in this study is voluntary. The investigators will explain the study to you and will any answer any questions you might have. It is your choice whether or not you take part in this study. If you agree to participate and then choose to withdraw from the study, that is your right, and your decision will not be held against you. You are being asked to take part in a research study designed to explore teacher decision-making while planning for individualized instruction, implementing those plans, and assessing students: specifically, students who have been labeled "below proficient" readers. Your participation in this research study involves completing an online questionnaire about your teaching beliefs, practices, and decision-making. You will be given the opportunity to volunteer for an interview at the end of the questionnaire. The voluntary interviews will be conducted through video conferencing. You might want to participate in this study if you want to help teacher educators and school administrators understand the many complex and difficult decisions that teachers make when children are not meeting proficiency standards in reading. You may choose to participate in this research study if you teach literacy skills to kindergarten through fifth-grade students. The reasonable foreseeable risks or discomforts to you if you choose to take part is possible loss of confidentiality which you can compare to the possible benefit as follows: Findings from this study will inform schools and school districts of the effects of having school policies and procedures for identifying and helping children who struggle in learning to read. Findings will also inform teacher educators of some of the gaps in teacher pedagogy from graduation to practice in the area of teaching reading and working with children who struggle with learning to read. You will not receive compensation for participation, but you will be given the opportunity to participate in a drawing for a gift card at the end of the questionnaire.

DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY: The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore a teacher's beliefs about working with struggling readers and the relationship between those beliefs and the teacher's teaching and assessment of reading. The research question that will guide this study is: What decisions do literacy teachers make while planning for individualized instruction, implementing those plans, and assessing students: specifically, students who have been labeled "below proficient" readers?

TIME COMMITMENT: Participation in this study through completing the online questionnaire should require approximately 40 minutes. The questionnaire is designed to be completed in one sitting or over multiple sittings.

STUDY PROCEDURES: This study involves completing an online questionnaire about your teaching beliefs, practices, and decision-making. You will be given the opportunity to volunteer for an interview at the end of the questionnaire. The voluntary interviews will be conducted through video conferencing and will last no more than 1 hour.

AUDIO/VIDEO/PHOTOGRAPHY: I agree to be video recorded during the voluntary interview part of this research study. I agree that the video recording can be used in publications or presentations. I do not agree that the video recording can be used in publications or presentations. I do not agree to be video recorded during the research study. You may still participate in the voluntary interview part of this study if you do not agree to be video recorded. The recordings will be kept with other electronic data in a secure UNT OneDrive account for the duration of the study.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS: Findings from this study will inform schools and school districts of the effects of having or not having school policies and procedures for identifying and helping children who struggle in learning to read. Findings will also inform teacher educators of some of the gaps in teacher pedagogy from graduation to practice in the area of teaching reading and working with children who struggle with learning to read.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS: Participation in this online survey involves risks to confidentiality similar to a person's everyday use of the internet. There is always a risk of breach of confidentiality. This risk is minimal, and a plan is in place to protect confidentiality. If you experience excessive discomfort when completing the research activity, you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty. The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen, but the study may involve risks to the participant, which are currently unforeseeable. UNT does not provide medical services, or financial assistance for emotional distress or injuries that might happen from participating in this research. If you need to discuss your discomfort further, please contact a mental health provider, or you may contact the researcher who will refer you to appropriate services. If your need is urgent, contact Tarrant County Crisis Hotline at 1-800-866-2465. This research study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life. However, if you do experience any discomfort, please inform the research team.

COMPENSATION: There is no compensation for participating in this study, but you will be given the opportunity to participate in a drawing for a gift card at the end of the questionnaire. There are no alternative activities offered for this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Efforts will be made by the research team to keep your personal information private, including all parts of this research study, and disclosure will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. All paper and electronic data collected from this study

will be stored in a secure location on the UNT campus and/or a secure UNT server for at least three (3) years past the end of this research in the PI's campus office. Research records will be labeled with a code and the master key linking names with codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB would first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection would be maintained. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records, as described here and to the extent permitted by law. In addition to the research team, the following entities may have access to your records, but only on a need-to-know basis: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the FDA (federal regulating agencies), the reviewing IRB, and sponsors of the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY: If you have any questions about the study you may contact Traci Pettet at ___ or Carol Wickstrom at ___. Any questions you have regarding your rights as a research subject, or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at___, or by email.

CONSENT: Your signature below indicates that you have read, or have had read to you all of the above. You confirm that you have been told the possible benefits, risks, and/or discomforts of the study. You understand that you do not have to take part in this study and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study; you also understand that the study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time. By signing, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. You will be asked to provide the names of other potential recruits, but you have the right to decline to provide this information. The researcher will maintain confidentiality when you suggest other persons for inclusion in the research. This study utilizes a third party software called Qualtrics, and is subject to the privacy policies of Qualtrics noted here: https://www.qualtrics.com/privacy-statement/ Please sign below if you are at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT DATE *If you agree to participate, please provide an electronic signature to the researcher team through Qualtrics. They will provide you with a copy to keep for your records.

Q1 I have read the Consent to Participate document found above or at: Informed Consent, and I agree to participate.

O Yes - this serves as my signature for consent (1)

O No - thank you for your time! You may close out the survey. (2)

Q2 I agree to be video recorded if I choose to participate in a voluntary interview at the end of this survey.

O Yes (1)

O No (2)

Q3 I agree that my video recordings may be used in presentations or publications.

O Yes (1)

O No (2)

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Descriptive Information

Q4 Which grade(s) do you currently teach?

▢ Kindergarten (1)

▢ First (2)

▢ Second (3)

▢ Third (4)

▢ Fourth (5)

▢ Fifth (6)

Q9 How many years have you taught this grade level?

o 1-2 years (1)

o 3-5 years (2)

o 6-10 years (3)

o 11 or more years (4)

Q5 How long have you been teaching in total?

o 1-2 years (1)

o 3-5 years (2)

o 6-10 years (3)

o 11-15 years (4)

o 16 or more years (5)

Q6 What type of certification do you have?

o Standard Teaching Certification (1)

o Alternative Teaching Certification (2)

o Emergency Teaching Certification (3)

Q11 Select the statement that most accurately describes your educational background.

o Awarded a Bachelor's degree (1)

o Completed some graduate courses (2)

o Awarded a Master's degree (3)

o Completed some doctoral courses (4)

o Awarded a Ph.D. or Ed.D (5)

Q7 Where are you currently teaching?

o Traditional Public School (1)

o Charter School (2)

o Private School (3)

o Other (4)

Q13 Does your school have a clearly outlined process for Response to Intervention (RTI)? (i.e. you have flow charts that show who is responsible for assessment, interventions, diagnosis, etc., and which tools should be used for assessment and monitoring progress)

o Yes, and I know what the process is for Tiers I, II, and III (1)

o Yes, but I am unsure what the process is (6)

o I'm not sure if we have an RTI process (7)

o No, we do not have an RTI process, but my school/district has similar processes (8)

o No, we do not have an RTI process (2)

o I do not know what RTI is. (3)

Q8 What zip code do you teach in? (optional)

_____

Q10 Please share anything else about your teaching experience that may be relevant to this study.

_____

End of Block: Descriptive Information

Start of Block: Teacher Decision Making

Q47 The following 8 questions are about your work with children who have been labeled "below-proficient" readers by standardized tests or reading benchmark assessments. These questions are the heart of my study, and even though they are the most time-consuming part of this questionnaire, please be as detailed as possible. After these 8 questions, the remainder of the survey will give you a scale of 1-5 for each question. I appreciate your help!

Q44 When you think about “below-proficient” readers, what things come to mind?

_____

Q45 What might be the cause of reading difficulties?

_____

Q46 How do you cope with meeting the needs of children with reading difficulties?

_____

Q48 How confident are you that you can help any reader reach proficiency? Why?

_____

Q49 What knowledge or resources do you draw on to help you cope with students’ reading difficulties?

_____

Q51 What policies and procedures does your school campus or school district have in place for identifying and working with children who have difficulty learning to read?

_____

Q52 Have your views on “below-proficient” readers changed after becoming a teacher in your current school or school district? If so, how have they changed and why do you think this is?

_____

Q53 What data do you use when making decisions about student proficiency in reading? Why do you use this data?

_____

End of Block: Teacher Decision Making

Start of Block: Thank you!

Q54 Would you be willing to participate in a video interview with Traci about the answers you provided today?

O Yes (1)

O No (2)

Q55 Thank you for volunteering! Please provide your email address so that I can contact you about an interview.

_____

Thank you!

APPENDIX D

EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interviews were guided by participants' answers to the open-ended survey questions. These questions are examples of some of the interview questions asked.

Data Collection - Survey Questions	*Example* of Clarifying Questions Used During Interviews – Actual questions were written and asked based on participant's survey answers
• When you think about "below-proficient readers, what things come to mind? • What might be the cause of reading difficulties? • How do you cope with meeting the needs of children with reading difficulties? • What knowledge or resources do you draw on to help you cope with reading difficulties?	• How do you decide if a student will receive extra time for literacy instruction in your class or in a pull-out classroom? • What do you do for your Tier I instruction? How effective do you think your/your grade-level's Tier I instruction is? • Do you have a program that you use for teaching literacy? How does this program help you meet the needs of your readers? • How confident are you when you are making decisions about literacy instruction with students in your classroom?
• How confident are you that you can help any reader reach proficiency? Why?	• Who conducts Tier II interventions for children in your classroom who need them? How does this work? • What happens if a student is not meeting your proficiency standards?
• What policies and procedures does your school campus or school district have in place for identifying and working with children who are struggling in learning to read?	• What types of assessments do you use for day-to-day instructional decisions?
• What data do you use when making decisions about student proficiency in reading? Why do you use this data?	• How confident are you when using data that you have collected (running records, observational data) or that results from benchmark assessments?
• What knowledge or resources do you draw on to help you cope with reading difficulties? • What policies and procedures does your school campus or school district have in place for identifying and working with children who have difficulty learning to read? • Have your views on "below-proficient" readers changed after becoming a teacher in this school or school district? If so, how have they changed and why do you think this is?	• How does your RTI process work at your school? Who is involved in making decisions about students? • Who do you reach out to when you are uncertain how to help students with reading difficulties? • How do your literacy coaches help teachers in your building? How has this impacted you? • Does your school have mandatory intervention blocks for each grade level? How does your grade-level handle your intervention block?

APPENDIX E

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PLAN PROPOSAL

Original Sampling Procedures and Rationale

In order to recruit teachers for this study, I met with school and school district administrators in my target school (Bryan Elementary[1]) and school district (Rosewood Independent School District) to explain the purpose of the study as well as the requirements for the teachers who participate. These administrators agreed to introduce me to teachers who teach literacy. Then those teachers received an email of introduction from me and a letter of consent that explained the study.

The planned participating school, Bryan Elementary, was chosen primarily for two reasons. First, I have personal connections at the school, so I have some knowledge of how reading instruction should occur in the classroom and how administration supports teachers when students have difficulty with grade-level reading tasks. Secondly, the school district where Bryan Elementary is located, Rosewood Independent School District (ISD), has a very clear policy based on the framework of Response to Intervention, for meeting the needs of students who are not making expected progress in academic subjects. School staff are provided with a flow map that gives conditional (if-then) statements for teachers to follow when working with children who do not meet proficiency standards on any one of the screeners listed in the Tier I flow map (see Appendix A). For example, the flow map advises teachers that, "If screener data is below expectation and the student is experiencing difficulties in academics and/or behavior, then the general education teacher provides Tier I strategies." This flow map requires general education teachers to provide classroom support for these students before

[1] School and school district names are pseudonyms

recommending them for additional support from support personnel such as literacy coaches or special education staff.

Most school districts in the area state that they have adopted RTI frameworks, but not all districts have clear expectations for their teachers like Rosewood ISD. This was another reason for choosing this district: all Rosewood ISD teachers have received the same message from the district about district expectations when children are exhibiting concerning academic behaviors.

It took about eight months of communication (January 2019 – August 2019) with Bryan Elementary administrators to receive a letter granting me permission to conduct research at their school.

Original Plan for Data Collection and Analysis

- *Document Review***.** Bryan Elementary teachers are required by the school district to keep daily notes on which instructional strategies are used with children identified as having academic or behavioral difficulties. These notes are not typically very detailed, but they are required to be turned in weekly to the RTI campus specialist. For the original study, teachers would be asked to elaborate on their notes for one child, beyond what is required, for a three-week period. I would give the teachers open-ended prompts to encourage them to use reflective writing (e.g., What is your goal for this student? How did you determine this goal?). Journals would be returned to the interviewer to read through before the follow-up interviews.

- *Survey***.** In addition to collecting the teacher notes, I planned to ask teachers to complete the DeFord Theoretical Orientation in Reading Profile (TORP) survey which uses a 5-point Likert scale response system to place teacher's beliefs about teaching reading into one of

three orientations: phonics, skills, and whole language. This survey would allow me to see the connection between teachers' theoretical beliefs and their decision-making when working with students in the classroom.

- *Interviews***.** The original research plan was to have participants engage in a follow-up interview. Interviews were to be semi-structured using the questions I developed to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions but allowing teachers to express themselves in more detail when needed. Additionally, I would ask the teachers to clarify journal entries that needed more explanation.

- *Data Analysis***.** Teachers from Bryan Elementary would have completed the TORP at the beginning of the study so I could assess if there were any patterns in teacher theoretical orientations amongst the participants. This questionnaire would also categorize teachers as preferring skills-based reading instruction, whole language instruction, or balanced literacy. I would then ask teachers to return journal notes to me weekly so I could make sure they were keeping adequate notes for this study. This would also allow me to begin analysis of these notes to see if any themes became evident before all the documents were collected. Additionally, I would be able to compare teachers' theoretical orientations as found by the TORP survey to their journals describing their practices to see if there were inconsistencies between what teachers say they believe and what they actually do in the classroom.

Quotes from the interviewees would be sorted according to themes that develop in the interviews about decision-making in literacy instructional practices, understanding of reading acquisition and instructional theories, and external influences on teaching pedagogy.

Building Rapport for the Original Study

In order to build rapport with the teacher participants before I collected data, I volunteered in two third-grade classrooms every week for five months (September 2019 – January 2019). During these volunteer sessions, I helped the teachers lead small guided reading groups, and I helped individual students in reading and mathematics. I avoided giving advice to teachers during this time so that my role in the classroom was clearly "helper" rather than "advisor." I did not want the teachers to feel that I was observing while they were teaching in order to make judgements.

Results of This First Research Plan

In December of 2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of North Texas approved my research plan. I immediately reached out to the administration at Bryan Elementary to see if they would help me find a time to meet with all of the upper elementary teachers to explain my study and hopefully find volunteers. For this study, I specifically wanted to observe how upper elementary school teachers (Grades 3 and 4 because there are no fifth grade classrooms at Bryan Elementary) make decisions on teaching reading. This did not result in any meetings because administrators believed that teachers were "too overwhelmed" with mid-year benchmark testing and RTI conferences. I asked the school counselor if I could sit in on the RTI conferences where teachers met individually with administrators to discuss student achievement and how they were meeting the needs of students in the classroom. The administration denied my request, stating that these conferences were private and not open to outsiders. By the end of January, we had still not found a time that all of the teachers could

meet, so I began to send out emails to each of the third and fourth grade teachers that explained my study and requested their help.

These emails and the follow-up emails sent two weeks later to these twelve teachers resulted in one positive response from a fourth grade teacher who was excited to help. This teacher had the majority of the grade-level's "below-proficient" readers in her classroom. I met with this teacher, explained the study, and gave her the necessary documents to get her started. Then she told me that all of her "below-proficient" readers go to RTI or dyslexia for reading and that they were only doing test preparation in class. She explained that in the fall semester, fourth grade teachers did the full reading program with reading groups, but in the spring semester, they focused on preparing for the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test. While I was shocked and disappointed at this, I decided that this information would still greatly inform my study. She began to take the requested notes at the end of February, 2020.

I then emailed the RTI coordinator/interventionist and the dyslexia teacher at Bryan Elementary about interviewing them since it was becoming obvious to me that they were the primary providers of reading instruction for "below-proficient" readers in fourth grade. They both responded positively and I interviewed both teachers at the beginning of March.

In mid-March, Bryan Elementary closed for Spring Break and did not reopen again that semester due to COVID-19 shelter-in-place mandates. This, along with the lack of volunteers at Bryan Elementary, led to a study redesign. With guidance from my dissertation chair and other committee members, my IRB was revised and resubmitted on March 24th, 2020, and approved on April 28.

APPENDIX F

DEDUCTIVE CODEBOOK

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Description of child code	Example quotes
Planning - What impacts the teacher's decisions when she is planning for instruction and interventions including: (1) Making groups of students (2) Choosing the content of what will be taught and materials for how to teach the content (3) Deciding who needs tiered support	Beliefs - Learning	Teacher's understanding of how students learn to read and what supports they need to become proficient readers.	I think I didn't understand truly the inner dynamics of reading. My decision-making was based off of what books and activities I would do. Reading was basically - all of read to them and they'll read and they'll learn by osmosis.
	Beliefs - Students	Teacher's beliefs about readers and students who have difficulty with reading.	A lot of times in that first grade age group they'll struggle at the beginning of the year and sometimes get frustrated and they have to be redirected to take the pressure off because once they become timid or afraid of their reading ability, they are not going to try. A lot of times I find that in January or February that age group just suddenly works.
	Beliefs-Teaching	Teacher's understanding of reading development and pedagogy and her reflection on her own teaching.	I get the feeling that when teachers get overwhelmed by not knowing how to help a child, they think placing them in tier is going to fix the problem.
	Beliefs - Classroom management	Teacher's management of the classroom space and student behaviors that provides a positive learning environment.	[My class was] just completely different than what I was used to and you know just very high need and struggling as a first year teacher to get my classroom management under control. When you know students are throwing things at me and others. And then trying to figure out how to serve these kids.
	Context - Materials	Materials include programs, online resources, libraries, progress-monitoring materials	I rely heavily on "The Literacy Continuum" by Fountas and Pinnell to guide me through the reading process with students at each level.
	Contexts - Admin and Policies	Administrators and policies include school and district administrators and the policies that come from these administrators. Included here are RTI procedures.	If you're a rule follower and your district says you need to be here [in the program/curriculum] but you know it's not necessarily what the kids need, that puts teachers in a really tough place when they don't feel like they have the freedom and the flexibility to be professionals and to do what the kids need
	Contexts - Curriculum	Curriculum includes state standards, curriculum guides provided by a school district, and pacing guides also provided by the school district.	For instance, Module A, Unit 1 [in the district framework] is where we started. It would tell us what standards we're going to be teaching during that time and then gives us performance tasks.
	Contexts - Personnel	Personnel are any school staff who are not administrators as well as parents.	Mostly I didn't feel that comfortable talking to my team because a lot of them have been teaching for a really long time and they were kind of burned out. And so I felt like if I asked them, they're like, No, don't worry about it. Whereas, like me, I actually was like, Well, I want to help. I want to make like a big impact.
	Expectations - Assumptions about students	Teachers' assumptions about students which may influence their expectations of a student's potential for reaching proficiency or their own potential for meeting the needs of the student through instruction.	We've really been trying to pick the kids that are going to LLI that are just below level. I think we realized as a district that we were having kids in LLI year after year after year. And really it was something more than just that boost that LLI is supposed to give them.
	Expectations - Support	Teacher's expectations of having a supportive community of teachers, administrators, and parents.	But as a first year teacher, I'm trying to figure it out. That's why I'm asking. I would love an explicit example, you know, just something.
	Self-Efficacy - Developing Expertise	Teacher's level of willingness or eagerness to improve her teaching or her work with struggling readers. Professional development or coaching that supports teachers in developing expertise.	That group needs more time knowing what good instruction looks like and how to read the data and how to make decisions.
	Self-Efficacy - Experience	The influence of teaching experience on self-efficacy.	I told them that I if I was going to stay at that school I needed to stay in fourth grade reading, because I needed a year where I could just know what I was doing. So this year was just leaps and bounds better. I knew when the district gave me this what from it worked and what didn't. And what I needed to tweak and change
	Self-Efficacy - Using Data	How data is used when making decisions about student proficiency in reading or how data is used to plan for instruction.	So they're taking a look at the most recent common formative assessment to determine how they're grouping to target that deficit. So they do that from nine to 9:30 every day. So every child is in some sort of small group working on a deficit or if they don't happen to have deficits, then they're extending or expanding at that time.

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Description of child code	Example quotes
	Self-Efficacy - Valuing Experts	Self-Efficacy can rely on trust in the "experts." Experts might be literacy coaches, more experienced teachers, or others that a teacher believes is a reliable source of help and information.	We have a coach, that is right there with us and she's fantastic and so I would go to her office. A lot of times, and asked her what I should do.
Implementing - What impacts the teacher's decisions when she is implementing the plans that were made: (1) How does she teach the material? (2) How does she group students while teaching or what teaching methods does she use? (3) What materials does she use to teach the lesson?	Beliefs - Learning	Teacher's understanding of how students learn to read and what supports they need to become proficient readers.	Targeted instruction in the hands of a teacher who believes 'all children can learn at high levels' is powerful in the lives of children.
	Beliefs - Students	Teacher's beliefs about readers and students who have difficulty with reading.	I think a lot of times we have to remind the teachers that parents are people and if we can give them some power to effect change then we're going to have easier time working together with his child to get them where they need to be.
	Beliefs-Teaching	Teacher's understanding of reading development and pedagogy and her reflection on her own teaching.	There's an eight-minute video of the Monroe phonograms. And it's just different photograms that kids will come into contact with to kind of help them learn to decode faster and, you know, build that fluency because we did concentrate so much on words per minute.
	Beliefs - Classroom management	Teacher's management of the classroom space and student behaviors that provides a positive learning environment.	And the behavior had taken over so much that it was basically just trying to deescalate all day and instruction was kind of put on a back burner.
	Context - Materials	Materials include programs, online resources, libraries, progress-monitoring materials	Then we also use a lot of Jennifer Saravallo. We use comprehension toolkit and we use the units of instruction for reading and writing as well.
	Contexts - Admin and Policies	Administrators and policies include school and district administrators and the policies that come from these administrators. Included here are RTI procedures.	When I would go to Data chats, [admin] didn't like that I was using the Jan Richardson model because their argument was, well, not all the other teachers have access to it because I personally bought the book online. So I was told, Well, you need to work on comprehension. So I was just kind of using the guided readers that I had in my room and then coming up with questions
	Contexts - Curriculum	Curriculum includes state standards, curriculum guides provided by a school district, and pacing guides also provided by the school district.	So I got really far behind [in the pacing guide], and it was super stressful. Yeah, because some days I would have to teach multiple unit lessons. So far behind.
	Contexts - Personnel	Personnel are any school staff who are not administrators as well as parents.	These reading coaches are very careful to celebrate each little step along the way.
	Expectations - Assumptions about students	Teachers' assumptions about students which may influence their expectations of a student's potential for reaching proficiency or their own potential for meeting the needs of the student through instruction.	Usually I find that my struggling readers tend to be more of that lower socioeconomic group. And I don't know how much of this is psychologically sound but this for my own experience tends to be students where reading is not a priority at home.
	Expectations - Support	Teacher's expectations of having a supportive community of teachers, administrators, and parents.	I wasn't progress monitoring every week and nobody came to really show me how to do it or what to do or what specific skill set they wanted me to work on with these kids.
	Self-Efficacy - Developing Expertise	Teacher's level of willingness or eagerness to improve her teaching or her work with struggling readers. Professional development or coaching that supports teachers in developing expertise.	Well if they don't see that [the professional development is] going to actually make an impact [they won't do it], and then you have the teachers that do it because 'I'm told to do it.' They don't understand why. So when they do it they don't implement it with the understanding of why they're doing it.
	Self-Efficacy - Experience	The influence of teaching experience on self-efficacy.	I just don't feel like I'm not submitting names because of all of my training. I'm not just submitting names, just because they're struggling, you know, like If I'm going to submit their name now with my training, it's because I've done everything I know how to do. And that's not working.
	Self-Efficacy - Using Data	How data is used when making decisions about student proficiency in reading or how data is used to plan for instruction.	(Talking about before-school interventions) Okay, this is the rhyme time classroom. We would get kids that were struggling with breaking apart sounds they would come to the classroom and play break it down games and other games for like 10 or 15 minutes.
	Self-Efficacy - Valuing Experts	Self-Efficacy can rely on trust in the "experts." Experts might be literacy coaches, more experienced teachers, or	You want every kid to make it at the end of the year. You know trying every single thing - asking coaches, talking to the dyslexia teacher.

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Description of child code	Example quotes
		others that a teacher believes is a reliable source of help and information.	
Assessing - What impacts the teacher's decisions when she is assessing student progress? (1) Who decides which assessment to use? (2) How often are assessments conducted?	Beliefs - Learning	Teacher's understanding of how students learn to read and what supports they need to become proficient readers.	Yeah, we also do look at their automaticity. Which, like I said, It'll give them a nonsense word and it gives them three options of a possible spelling That they have to do and then… But mostly it's the words per minute. (Teacher believes that automaticity and fluency are important to reading)
	Beliefs - Students	Teacher's beliefs about readers and students who have difficulty with reading.	I would also say a proficient reader to me is somebody that can explain to others what they're reading. So not just getting lost inside a book, but being able to share what they're learning and reading with others.
	Beliefs-Teaching	Teacher's understanding of reading development and pedagogy and her reflection on her own teaching.	If they know that "yes, I'm doing this program, but I'm really focusing on making sure that I'm helping this child with retell because that is what this child is having trouble with. They can read and decode words great, but they are having a hard time sharing that information. So comprehension might need to be a little bit more beefed up during the intervention time.
	Beliefs - Classroom management	Teacher's management of the classroom space and student behaviors that provides a positive learning environment.	No quotes for this code
	Context - Materials	Materials include programs, online resources, libraries, progress-monitoring materials	We use the [Fountas and Pinnell] guided reading. And then they even have reading records that go with them and everything to track progress.
	Contexts - Admin and Policies	Administrators and policies include school and district administrators and the policies that come from these administrators. Included here are RTI procedures.	You know the expectation, but not requirement is that we have running records for kids throughout the year. And then we give the i-station beginning, middle, and end of year computer assessment. And those are the only ones that are required.
	Contexts - Curriculum	Curriculum includes state standards, curriculum guides provided by a school district, and pacing guides also provided by the school district.	No quotes for this code
	Contexts - Personnel	Personnel are any school staff who are not administrators as well as parents.	(from a Reading Interventionist) Some of our teachers already have a good idea, but if they don't know, they say "I have to monitor? How am I going to do that? I don't have time. I have to teach them." I say let me come. I'll pull the group and I'll show you how it can be done and how you can quickly record it so it's not overwhelming.
	Expectations - Assumptions about students	Teachers' assumptions about students which may influence their expectations of a student's potential for reaching proficiency or their own potential for meeting the needs of the student through instruction.	They say, "Oh this kid is always going to be two years behind. Don't even bother testing him above this level."
	Expectations - Support	Teacher's expectations of having a supportive community of teachers, administrators, and parents.	No quotes for this code
	Self-Efficacy - Developing Expertise	Teacher's level of willingness or eagerness to improve her teaching or her work with struggling readers. Professional development or coaching that supports teachers in developing expertise.	No quotes for this code
	Self-Efficacy - Experience	The influence of teaching experience on self-efficacy.	I had never done running records before - I did running records in one class, but that meant nothing to me. Not until like I really sat down and did it with each of my students. I did in the morning, definitely weren't as accurate but It was easier for me to analyze at the end of the day when I had done like 40 of them.
	Self-Efficacy - Using Data	How data is used when making decisions about student proficiency in reading or how data is used to plan for instruction.	They would give the data back to us so that every 3 weeks we would have had a data meeting where we can look at the kids and track their progress. And I appreciate it a lot because I feel like a lot of the schools don't work with data until right at the end of the year and we're looking at remediation.

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Description of child code	Example quotes
	Self-Efficacy - Valuing Experts	Self-Efficacy can rely on trust in the "experts." Experts might be literacy coaches, more experienced teachers, or others that a teacher believes is a reliable source of help and information.	No quotes for this code

APPENDIX G

INDUCTIVE CODEBOOK

Inductive Coding	Definition of Codes	Pattern Codes	Definition of Pattern Codes
Admin affect decisions			
Admin affect decisions	Admin includes district and school admin and policies made by admin; Decisions are affected through school/district/state policies, purchasing programs or hiring staff, mandating curriculum use, etc.	Admin affect decisions	Admin includes district and school admin and policies made by admin; Decisions are affected through school/district/state policies, purchasing programs or hiring staff, mandating curriculum use, etc.
District determines assessment	The school district decides what assessments will be used and how and when they will be administered	District determines assessment	The school district decides what assessments will be used and how and when they will be administered
Teacher self-efficacy	The teacher believes that she has the ability to be successful or to manage the situation due to administrators' expectations of teachers	Teacher self-efficacy	The teacher believes that she has the ability to be successful or to manage the situation due to administrators' expectations of teachers
Specific assessments affect Decisions			
Assessment determines program use	The assessment that will be given determines what programs/materials will be used for teaching - particularly when there is no program provided and teachers must find their own materials	Assessment determines program use	The assessment that will be given determines what programs/materials will be used for teaching - particularly when there is no program provided and teachers must find their own materials
Assessment matches instruction	Teachers plan for instruction based on what will be covered in the assessment	Assessment matches instruction	Teachers plan for instruction based on what will be covered in the assessment
Assessment program affects decisions	Web-based assessment programs make decisions for teachers on what to teach, which children are "at-risk", who needs interventions, etc.	Assessment program affects decisions	Web-based assessment programs make decisions for teachers on what to teach, which children are "at-risk", who needs interventions, etc.
Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs Affect Practice			
Beliefs about how children learn affect practice	Teachers' beliefs such as - children who are below-proficient readers need additional small group reading instruction - or students who read independently become stronger readers - affect how they teach reading or set up their classroom	Effective reading instruction	The teacher knows and possibly uses effective reading instructional strategies such as using small groups, independent reading, and basing instruction on student data. The teacher understands the value of other reading activities such as independent reading
Differentiating	Teachers differentiate instruction for students depending on ability or data		
Effective reading instruction	The teacher knows and possibly uses effective reading instructional strategies such as using small groups, independent reading, and basing instruction on student data		
Independent reading better than programs	Reading independently can impact students more than using reading programs		
Organization of reading class	Reading class organization such as small groups, working with half of the class at a time, and reading centers		
Teacher knowledge of good reading instruction	Teacher explains "good" reading instruction such as fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction		
Some influences are stronger than beliefs	Teachers understand what effective reading instruction is, but there are other influences that are more influential such as the school district or a program and therefore take priority in decision-making	Some influences are stronger than beliefs	Teachers understand what effective reading instruction is, but there are other influences that are more influential such as the school district or a program and therefore take priority in decision-making
Student background affects teacher decisions	Teachers make decisions based on a student's background such as family life, language proficiency, and financial situation	Teachers' knowledge of students affects decisions	Teachers don't just look at data, but they look at the whole child to determine strengths, needs and possibilities for growth

Inductive Coding	Definition of Codes	Pattern Codes	Definition of Pattern Codes
Teacher knowledge of students affects confidence	When a teacher doesn't know the students well, she will not be able to meet their needs		
Teachers' knowledge of students affects decisions	Teachers don't just look at data, but they look at the whole child to determine strengths and needs		
Professional Development Matters/Need for Professional Development Support Systems			
Coaching, mentoring, and modeling matter	Coaching, mentoring and modeling from other teachers, admin, or coaches matters in the teacher's ability to plan, implement, and assess students.	Coaching, mentoring, and modeling matter	Coaching, mentoring and modeling from other teachers, admin, or coaches matters in the teacher's ability and confidence to plan, implement, and assess students.
Confidence of teacher affects student growth	A teacher who is confident in her instruction might have impressive student growth		
Consistency across grade-levels	Grade levels school-wide provide consistency in their reading programs		
Desire to improve	A teacher doesn't believe that she is a proficient reading teacher and would like to improve		
Relevant PD	Teachers see a need for professional development and appreciate it when they have it	Relevancy of PD	Teachers may see a need for professional development and appreciate it when they have it. Teachers may also express a desire to become better at teaching reading and need for support.
Teacher's need for support	A teacher needs support from other personnel or admin to be successful		
Trying to help - Agency	A teacher says she is trying to help students but doesn't feel equipped to meet the need		
Curriculum affects decisions			
Benefit of curriculum	Curriculum helps teachers learn how to teach reading or helps them in the planning, implementing, and assessing stages	Effect of curriculum on teachers and teaching	Curriculum (standards, curriculum guides or frameworks, pacing guides, and programs or other materials used to teach) benefits and restricts teachers when they plan and implement their plans. They also learn how to teach reading through the use of programs. When curriculum is not provided, teachers must find their own programs to use.
Curriculum affects teachers negatively	Curriculum restricts teachers or replaces their agency		
Programs are affected by experience	Teachers use programs differently (i.e. choosing which parts of the program to use or ignore) when they are experienced teachers		
Programs serve as reading training	Teachers learn to teach literacy by following programs or professional development that comes with new programs		
Personally owned programs used when not provided by district	Teachers purchase or find free resources when programs are not provided by the district		
Curriculum drives teaching decisions	Curriculum determine what, when, and how concepts will be taught	Curriculum drives teaching decisions	Curriculum determine what, when, and how concepts will be taught. Curriculum determines how reading instruction will be differentiated and organized. Curriculum might be prioritized over student data.
Assessments built into programs	Teachers use assessments that come with the program		
Organization by Program	Teachers organize instruction by using a program - specifically small groups		
Program-driven instead of data-driven	Teachers make decisions based on a program rather than student data		
Programs affect decisions	Programs tell teachers which texts to use, how to monitor progress, and what skills to work on		
Student success comes from curriculum decisions	The beliefs that if the curriculum is good then students will become good readers		

Inductive Coding	Definition of Codes	Pattern Codes	Definition of Pattern Codes
Understanding program affects decisions	If teachers do not understand the research behind or purpose for a program, they may not use the program appropriately		
	Data affects decisions		
Data affects student placement in reading groups	Student placement in reading groups or tiered instruction is done using data	Data affects student placement in reading groups	Student placement in reading groups or tiered instruction is done using data
Mandated testing determines use of data	Teachers who teach in grade-levels tested by the state use data differently than teachers whose students will not be tested		
Assessment determines at-risk	Assessments determine which students are at-risk for reading difficulties rather than teachers		
Data collection builds confidence	Data collection from formative or summative assessment; confidence is shown when a teacher says something like, "I use student data to determine what my students need and then I plan for that."	Data collection builds confidence	Data collection from formative or summative assessment is used to make decisions rather than curriculum; confidence/agency is shown when a teacher says something like, "I use student data to determine what my students need and then I plan for that."
Data decisions over programs	Data use is more influential than the program used for reading instruction		
Data discussions give teachers agency	When teachers have data discussions with colleagues, they feel like they are in control of outcomes		
	Experience Matters		
Experience affects confidence	Years teaching or professional development opportunities increase teacher confidence when making instructional decisions	Experience affects confidence	Years teaching or professional development opportunities increase teacher confidence when making instructional decisions
Experience affects decision-making	Teachers who are less experienced might make different decisions than more experienced teachers.	Experience affects decision-making	Teachers who are less experienced might make different decisions than more experienced teachers.
	Collaboration affects decisions/Collaboration affects self-efficacy		
Personnel affect decisions	Other teachers and staff - not admin - influence teacher decisions	Personnel affect decisions	Teachers and staff work collaboratively to make decisions.
Personnel affect passion	Other teachers and staff affect how a teacher feels about teaching reading		
Personnel use data to make decisions collectively	Some teachers work together with other teachers and staff to look at student data and make decisions		
RTI teams impact more than the student being discussed	The RTI team discussion impacts other students in the teacher's classroom	Personnel collaboration affects confidence	When teachers collaborate, they feel more confident in their decisions because the decisions were made by a group of people with varying expertise.
Personnel collaboration affects confidence	When teachers collaborate, they feel more confident in their decisions because the decisions were made by a group of people with varying expertise.		

APPENDIX H

IRB APPROVALS: ORIGINAL AND MODIFICATION

UNT
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THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Research and Innovation

December 5, 2019

PI: Carol Wickstrom
Study Title: Decisions Teachers Make When Students are Labeled "Below-Proficient" Readers

RE: Human Subjects Application # IRB-19-677

Dear Dr. Carol Wickstrom:

In accordance with 45 CFR Part 46 Section 46.104, your study titled "Decisions Teachers Make When Students are Labeled "Below-Proficient" Readers" has been determined to qualify for an exemption from further review by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Attached to your Cayuse application in the Study Detail section, under the Attachments tab, are the consent documents with IRB approval.

No changes may be made to your study's procedures or forms without prior written approval from the UNT IRB. Please contact The Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at 940-565-4643 if you wish to make any such changes. Any changes to your procedures or forms after 3 years will require completion of a new IRB application.

We wish you success with your study.

Note: Please do not reply to this email. Please direct all questions to untirb@unt.edu

Sincerely,

UNT
EST. 1890

THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Research and Innovation

April 28, 2020

PI: Carol Wickstrom
Study Title: Decisions Teachers Make When Students are Labeled "Below-Proficient" Readers

RE: Human Subjects Application # IRB-19-677

Dear Dr. Carol Wickstrom:

The UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB) has received your request to modify your study titled "Decisions Teachers Make When Students are Labeled "Below-Proficient" Readers." As required by federal law and regulations governing the use of human subjects in research projects, the UNT IRB has examined the request to (INCLUDE REASONS FOR MODIFICATION HERE) and to revise the informed consent documents to reflect these changes. The modification to this study is hereby approved for use with human subjects.

Attached to your Cayuse application in the Study Detail section under the Attachments tab are the consent documents with IRB approval. Please copy **and use this form only** for your study subjects.

Please contact The Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at (940) 565-4643, if you wish to make changes or need additional information.

COVID-19 is having an impact on normal operations and procedures at UNT. Please follow all UNT rules and procedures regarding your human research studies, including cessation of face-to-face interactions with participants, during this time.

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